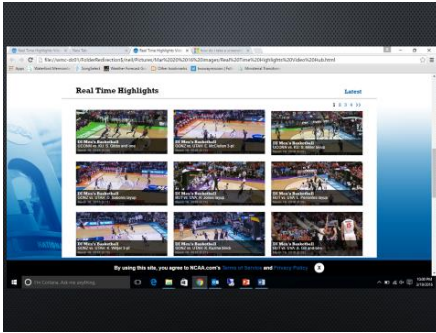


I. Intro. In churches around the world, this is Palm Sunday, but for American sports fans, this is the first weekend of March Madness

A. I'm talking about the NCAA men's basketball tournament, one of the most-watched sports events on TV



1. Apart from spending hours in front of a TV or computer, which I don't have time to do, one way I sort of keep up with it is on my cellphone, where I can quickly get 10-second video clips of someone's athletic 3-point play or a sweet Alley Oop dunk

2. If I missed a game, I can access one-minute compiled highlight reels of the top

plays of the game

B. Highlight reels are usually about some key sports plays captured on video, but this morning I'm talking about a bigger concept of "highlight reels"

1. We understand this concept of something that's flashy, important & condensed, kind of like the "Reader's Digest"

2. We are naturally attracted to things that are bright, spectacular, unusual or famous

3. Besides literal sports highlight reels, here are a few other examples:

a) I grew up in the late 60's and early 70's with the great acoustic sounds & harmonies of Simon & Garfunkel on my siblings' record albums

(1) As a young adult, I couldn't afford to buy every single Simon & Garfunkel album ever released, no matter how much I loved their sound

(2) So in the days before illegal free music downloads, how would I listen to songs I really wanted to hear?

(3) Answer: Buy a "greatest hits" album, so then I could hear all their most popular songs on just one album! A "greatest hits" album is the "highlight reel" of a music artist's recordings

b) Today in nurture hour we will have **[had]** a very special time in our farewell celebration of Pastor Lyle's ministry

(1) While it's hard to have him leave, it will be **[was]** sort of a church party in his honor

(2) It will be **[was]** in effect, a "highlight reel" of Lyle's pastoral ministry here @ Waterford

4. It's human nature to be drawn to the "highlight reels" of life ... we pay attention to the parties, the greatest hits, the extraordinary events, the flashy objects

II. Our Scripture texts today reflect that tendency

A. Psalm 118 mentions a chief cornerstone ... what's a cornerstone?

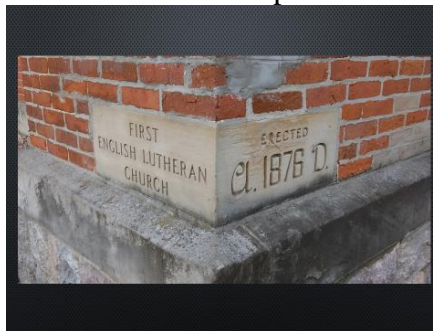
1. When a building foundation was laid in biblical times, the cornerstone was important because all other stones were set in relation to this one.

- a) It had to be a strong stone and able to help support the weight of two intersecting walls

- b) Over the centuries, cornerstones have continued in use, but they have become more decorative than functional in importance

- (1) It became traditional for special information to be engraved in cornerstones, such as the building's name & date of construction

- (2) I don't think we have a cornerstone on this building, but you don't have to look very hard among the historical buildings of Goshen to find examples of cornerstones



- c) If there is any one stone or masonry block in a building's foundation that is glamorous or attention-grabbing, it's the cornerstone.

2. Yet surprisingly, Ps. 118:22 describes a cornerstone that was not selected for its glamor or exceptional beauty at all

- a) Rather, this cornerstone came from a pile of stones that the builders had rejected!

- b) A nondescript stone, maybe even an ugly scarred one, was actually chosen to be the cornerstone! (*Not your typical "highlight reel" stone!*)

3. The word "cornerstone" appears several times in both OT and NT, but its usages are mostly metaphorical and not literal

- a) In ancient Jewish times, the cornerstone in Ps. 118 was often interpreted as referring to Abraham, or David, or the Messiah

- (1) The reference to David is not so hard for us to understand, since David was the youngest & least expected of the sons of Jesse

to be considered as a candidate for King of Israel after Saul.

(2) Yet this unlikely shepherd boy was revered as perhaps Israel's greatest king ever.

b) Jesus has long been interpreted as the true fulfillment of Ps. 118:22, including by New Testament writers Peter & Paul

B. And in our Gospel reading for Palm Sunday, Jesus came into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week of the Jewish Passover Feast

1. Passover was a "highlight reel" time in the Jewish year, when they celebrated God delivering the Hebrew slaves from an oppressive empire

2. Because the Romans in Jesus' day didn't want these Jewish subjects to get any ideas about repeating that deliverance, Governor Pontius Pilate himself arrived in Jerusalem around that same time.

a) Pilate entered the city in a grand processional with trumpets on a war horse, with thousands of troops

b) Now THAT processional was the highlight reel on that spring Sunday almost two thousand years ago!

3. But the processional of a poor, unarmed itinerant Jewish rabbi, riding on a donkey with a few uneducated rural supporters? Not so much!

C. Now let's return to basketball highlight reels ...

III. Does a highlight reel tell you the whole story of a game? Of course not!

A. A highlight reel doesn't convey the back-and-forth momentum swings, the sub-stories within the game ...

1. It doesn't show the star player who wasn't on the court because he had already fouled out

2. It doesn't show you the hours & hours of team drills and shooting practice that led to those players even appearing in the highlight reel

3. A highlight reel doesn't show you the tenacity of the player who fought off flu symptoms to play the game of his life

4. It doesn't show you the good sportsmanship of the player who helped her opponent up off the floor.

B. In today's busy, fast-paced world, we're tempted to believe that if we watch enough highlight reels, we will be adequately informed and we won't miss out on anything that matters.

1. We think, "Just show me the highlights, summarize the game in a sentence, and I'm good to go."
2. But some coaches and fans will tell you that the beauty and essence of basketball is more to be found in those other off-camera moments, not in the highlight reels ...

IV. In our Xian lives today, we are also tempted to see God at work only in what I'm calling "spiritual highlight reels"

A. After all, we expect to see God in the miracles ...

1. in the amazing answers to prayer ... in dramatic conversion stories
2. in the emotional power-packed worship services where the Holy Spirit's movement was obvious ... in the fervor of someone who feels on fire for the Lord

B. But the beauty and essence of Xian faith are often most truly expressed in the quiet mundane events

1. In a Sunday School teacher who lovingly, patiently guides along children in God's ways, week after week
2. Sometimes God's work is seen best even in a routine church board meeting discussing church finances!
 - a) At our last Ministry Leadership Council meeting, we had long discussions about the financial challenges facing the church
 - (1) about how giving & budgets interact, about how & how much we support missions & ministries, about possible strategies to be responsible stewards with the money God entrusts to us
 - (2) Despite some variations of opinions among us, we seemed to be moving toward some agreement in our thinking
 - b) As we concluded the meeting, it felt like a long, but productive evening ... yet I asked our leaders, "What made it productive?"
 - (1) Did it feel productive because we made certain decisions? ... or because we solved x or y problems?"
 - (2) Even though the conversation was about a lot of mundane stuff like budgets & cash flow, God was present there with us in that meeting!
 - c) We felt God present because we were consciously talking about ministries in the kingdom of God, not merely about columns of interchangeable numbers in a spreadsheet
 - (1) We didn't know if we would reach a common mind, because we just as well could have reached an impasse, or left with hard feelings about disagreements

(2) Instead, we saw God at work in the unity we seemed to arrive at, which was a unity not forged by powerful arguments or charismatic personalities or fearmongering.

d) I celebrate the unspectacular work God was doing in our midst at a routine church board meeting!

C. But beyond ordinary activities that are merely overlooked, God is sometimes working where we least expect it ... in the unexpected or difficult things that happen to us:

1. In the aftermath of a tragedy or a traumatic death, God can come in the personal support & deepened relationships of one or two persons who literally become the hands & feet of Jesus to one who has lost so much ...

2. Sometimes God can seem totally absent from a Christian's life in an extended spiritual dry time called "Dark night of the soul",

a) In the dark night, a loving God seeks to draw that person into closer relationship with God by weaning them off lesser attachments that had become god-like for them.

b) Even though God is indeed at work within the dark night of the soul, that person often cannot see it for themselves

3. This year at Waterford, more than any other year I've been here, I'm tempted to see a "resource deficit" going on

a) It's not just the financial challenges in front of us

b) It feels like our human resources are stretched very thin right now

(1) Soon we will be temporarily short one pastor ...

(2) Half-way through our program year, we still have several ministry teams that have no regular designated leader, or someone who's doing so only temporarily, because we can't find someone willing to lead

(3) We have some functions of weekly importance for our worship life that are limping along because we still need a coordinator (worship visuals, and our audiovisual booth)

c) The usual ways we had for filling our people needs don't seem to be working so well this year ... our leaders are beginning to tire of operating short-handed

4. This situation makes me cry out, "God, what's going on here?" ... or maybe I should ask, "God, what are you trying to do here?"

a) Indeed, I wonder if God is at work teaching us that our emphasis in gifting ministries is on the wrong approach?

b) Or perhaps God is teaching us that we're trying to do too many different ministries in our church?

- c) Or maybe God is leading us into a "Dark night of the church"?
- (1) Numerous authors & spiritual directors have described how the dark night can not only happen to individuals, but also to congregations, when the methods & techniques that used to work no longer work, and the things that used to satisfy no longer satisfy. (L. Roger Owens & Anthony B. Robinson, "Dark night of the church", *Christian Century* (Dec. 26, 2012), pp. 28-30; Daniel P Schrock, *The Dark Night: A Gift of God*, Herald Press 2009, chap. 10)
 - (2) Could this human resource deficit be God's way of leading us to rely on God more and on our programming structures less?
- d) I really don't know the answer to this last question, but I do know it's ultimately God's church, not yours or mine, so we need to be looking for God at work through this time when resources appear thin ... not just God working despite the thin resources.

V. Conclusion: My friends, spiritual highlight reels are easy to spot ...

A. Whatever is flashy & quick ... undeniably supernatural ... powerful or easy to understand ... whatever cuts thru our confusion & makes us feel better

1. These are the spiritual "half-court shots", the "grand slam home runs" that reassure us that God is still on the throne.
2. Sometimes God does come through for us "in the clutch" with powerful sermons & songs, amazing answers to prayer and miraculous turnarounds ... mighty acts that are indeed worthy of the highlight reels.

B. But brothers & sisters, God's work in this world starts & ends far beyond the highlight reels

1. Do not forget God's bold & powerful prophet Elijah
 - a) This is the man of God who featured in multiple spiritual highlight reels in ch. 17 & 18 of 1 Kings:
 - (1) He saves a widow & her son from starvation in a drought
 - (2) Later raises that same son back to life after he dies
 - (3) Presides over the showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel to demonstrate who is the true God
 - b) But in ch. 19, Elijah flees for his life out into the wilderness & God calls him to come out of his cave to witness God himself passing by. So the biggest "highlight reels" of nature all happen before him: hurricane winds; earthquake; & fire, but God is not in all these things
 - c) God's message to Elijah ends up being not in these bombastic things, but in the sound of sheer silence, the "still small voice" ... like the stone that the builders rejected

2. We're one week away from the biggest salvation highlight reel of all time: Easter, but there are still a lot of "lowlights" and rejected stones to pay attention to in the coming week

3. Let's learn to recognize and celebrate what God is doing not just in the special or spectacular things, but in ordinary things ... even strange or unpleasant things

C. O God of booming thunder as well as the still small voice, sharpen the hearing of our spiritual ears, so that we may better hear you in the everyday and recognize you in the stones that others reject. Amen.