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Radio Address: The Quest for Certainty (WGN), 1943

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Almost everyone in America agrees this morning that behind and above the battle of bombs and planes and guns in the world today there is the deeper and more desperate conflict in the world of the spirit - the battle of ideas and thoughts and philosophies. We know that this war is not only being fought in North Africa, in the Southwestern Pacific, or on the plains of Russia; it is being fought wherever men and women think and believe and live. There is, on the one hand, the philosophy of blood and power, the blind imprisonment of the human spirit in the chains of hate and fear; there is, on the other hand, the philosophy of freedom and peace, and the value and dignity of the human soul. It is no accident of chance or circumstance that in many of the occupied countries of Europe and even in Germany itself, the Church and the Church alone has consistently opposed the men and the ideas that have enslaved Europe. While other social institutions - the universities, the great industries, the labor organizations - have either sold out or died, the churches have stood up against the ideas which have made Europe a slave market and the world a place of blood and tears. They knew - and they know now - that there are ideas and philosophies of life and government which cannot live side by side. Finally it must be one or the other. We cannot worship the State and still believe in the God of all States and all nations. We cannot conceive of man's highest destiny in terms of living and dying for the fatherland rather than in living for God and dying in God; we cannot believe in the subjection of the human spirit to the evil doctrines of blood and race and soil and the freedom of the human soul under the liberty of the Cross. The deadly blood of totalitarian philosophy and the lifegiving water of Christianity simply will not mix.
Here, however, we come upon an important and fundamental question: How was it possible for these evil ideas, so completely removed from the mainstream of Western thought, to take hold of an entire generation and hurl it into the bloodiest conflict in the long and bitter story of man? It is not my purpose this morning to attempt a complete answer to that question. Undoubtedly there were many causes - social, economic, historic - both near and remote. I should like to isolate just one reason which is rooted in the human spirit rather than in the halls of Versailles. The momentary conquerors of Europe were able to take hold of an entire generation and mold it to their purposes of evil because they were absolutely sure of the rightness of their cause. If there were moments of doubt and fear - as there surely must be now in 1943 - they were well hidden from the people. In all the words and acts of the dictators there was a relentless certainty of conviction which held a terrible fascination for a generation which knew only hunger and doubt and fear. In all the world's history there is hardly a more terrifying example of the power of certainty over the mind and heart of man, no matter how wrong that certainty may be.

Now there is one basic fact which should be burned into the heart of every man and woman working and sacrificing and dying in every corner of the world for the cause of freedom and justice and mercy: We cannot oppose certainty with uncertainty. We cannot chain the forces of evil loose in the world unless we are absolutely sure of the power of good. The scoffer, the skeptic, the cynic never puts up a good fight. Since nothing is sure and important, nothing is worth fighting for. There are no atheists in foxholes not only because God is near when death is near, but also because no consistent atheist can believe in anything hard enough and long enough to get into a foxhole for it and with it. If there is nothing everlastingly important and eternally valid in life, then we may as well live like beasts of the field and die like beasts of the field, fighting for our share of the world's food and dying for our place in the world's
sun. If, however, as many of us in America today believe, life holds something infinitely greater and better than the philosophy of blood and power, then we can oppose the certainty of the apostles of evil with a greater and higher certainty - an assurance which will carry us through these passing years of sacrifice and tears and death to a new and a better world built under the merciful eyes of God.

Must we not confess this morning that we are not yet equipped for that great task and not yet ready to face our manifest destiny? In this respect our record since the dawn of the twentieth century has not been good. Some of us have been uncertain about everything, and others of us have been certain of the wrong things. There was a time, for example, when we were very sure of the idea of progress. Fascinated by the amazing increase of mechanical invention, and our steadily growing control over the forces of nature, many of us were dominated by the idea that the history of man is a steady, upward progression, a triumphant march toward Utopia. We were very sure that if we could only acquire enough things - things we could feel and touch and see - money and food and houses and clothing - then, somehow, the things unseen - faith and hope and happiness and love - would come to us in greater measure than ever before. But it just didn't work out that way. We were turning life upside down. Today the idea of progress lies buried on the plains of Russia, on the Islands of the South Seas, in the rollcall of armies, the toll of ruined cities, and the endless march of death across the world - buried in blood and tears and sweat and death. Once more we have learned that what is important is not what a man has, but what he is; not his money, but his soul; not his momentary happiness, but his eternal good. We were sure of the wrong things! And then there were some of us, living in a world of shattering bewilderment, who felt that the best thing to do would be to give up the quest for certainty entirely and to be sure about nothing. It became fashionable to be skeptical and cynical.
about everything. The shrugged shoulder and the tolerant smile were the mark of
the intelligent man and woman. The world of our time not only lost its way; it
even threw away the map. We stumbled around in the dark with no direction and
no certainty. We believed that it was sophisticated to believe in nothing. Like
the Athenians in the marketplace we were always looking for something new, not
something true. Every idea, no matter how wrong or how insane, got a respectful
hearing. Every lunatic, intellectual or moral, had his case. Every fool thought
there was another side to everything. Everybody had a thousand answers to every
ten questions. An age is always known by what it tolerates, and we tolerated sham
and intellectual dishonesty and hypocrisy and moral wrong until the prophecy of
Matthew Arnold came true:

"The world which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams
So various, so beautiful, so new
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
Where ignorant armies clash by night."

And so, when somebody like Hitler came along, fearfully sure of everything wrong
and everything evil, we were suddenly afraid and alone. We had nothing certain
and powerful and sure. We could not oppose his certainty with a greater certainty.
We did not know what to believe or what to do. We were like children crying in
the night.

And all this was not - and is not - merely a surface trouble. We were not able
to remove our doubts and fears and uncertainties by passing a few more laws or
talking vaguely about the brotherhood of man or the blessings of democracy. Our trouble was far deeper than that - down, far down in the hidden corners of our souls. Irwin Edman, Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, summed it up bluntly in his little book Candle in the Dark. "The outer world," he said, "is merely a reflection of the childishness, the savagery, the animality which we have of late discovered in ourselves. The evil in man's heart has become epidemic in the world." The evil in man's heart! Here is something which many of us have not heard for a long time. Must we perhaps learn again, the hard and bitter way, that deep down beneath all the doubt and fear and hate in the world there is the doubt and fear and hate which is in our hearts as a result of sin? We didn't like that word when we were under the spell of the idea of progress or the glib slogans of demagogues. We talked about the barbarism behind us, we hated the barbarism against us, but we forgot all about the barbarism within us - the soft, rotten barbarism of sin. And so, that great forgotten word comes back to us now out of the welter and woe of our time, in the roar of the judgment and anger of God and tells us that this is our first and last trouble; to preach to us, if you please, that we can never face the facts of our mad world unless we first face the fact of sin and by the mercy of God do something about it. When we dig down to the roots of our trouble we find that our problems are the problems of the individual human soul, and at the very heart of all of them is the problem of sin. It is the eternal and immutable will of God that life be governed by certain definite laws. A long time ago these laws were summarized by One Who knew them better than anyone else and kept them as no other could: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself." To break these laws is sin - the conscious, willful battering down of the blessed, holy relationship between God and man and God and the world. And sin must always mean uncertainty and loneliness. So long as men and women sin - against God, against themselves, against their neighbor - they cannot live surely and happily. Our first and last trouble is the trouble of sin. It is time for us to face it honestly.
When we do that, we come immediately upon the fact of God and of eternity. Behind and above the uncertainty and confusion of men stands the certainty and stillness of God. If for a moment this morning, or tomorrow morning, or at any hour of the day or night between now and your dying moment, you will listen with the heart and mind of faith, you will hear His voice—a single word—sweeping away all uncertainty and carrying all of hope and sureness and heaven. This word is the word "Come." It is enough for us. Behind that single word lies the immense, eternal power of God over the forces of evil, the love of the redeeming Christ, the marvel of His Presence, and the stillness of the strength of God that can bridge the ages and silence the powers of darkness. To hear the voice of God in faith these days is not an easy thing to do. In fact, it is so hard that it requires the power of God the Holy Spirit to bring it to us. Since our trouble is deep it is not easily healed. It can be done only through the power of the Cross. This evening time of the world may conceivably darken down into a blacker night than man has known before; but it cannot and will not, if there are men and women in the world who listen today to the quiet, relentless, the tender and healing voice of God.

And so this is my last word: Above the noise and confusion and restlessness and hate and greed and pride and lust and war rises today, ever and again, the eternal Christ, the Savior of your soul and mine. Perhaps the divine hourglass is turning and the sands of life are sifting once more in the direction of the Cross. Here our quest for certainty ends. Here is the final revelation of the great eternal, divine certainty of God in the person of the Christ of the purple wounds, who 2000 years ago poured down His blood before the heart of God as an everlasting atonement for sin and an eternal revelation of the ultimate certainty in life and in death. Here at the crossroads of the world and the meeting place of the ages; here where all the desperate tides of the world's doubt and fear were poured through the channels of one weary heart; here in Christ is the truth of God, the light of heaven, and the last great answer to the uncertainties of men.