I borrow my title from the outstanding British Methodist preacher and world Christian, Colin Morris, and his volume of sermons entitled *Bugles in the Afternoon*. He says his title is based on the legend that Satan was a fallen angel who rebelled against God and was thrown out of heaven. Sometime later, Satan was asked if there was anything he missed from heaven. Satan responded: “I miss the sound of trumpets in the morning.”

It’s a glorious image, isn’t it: “Trumpets in the morning.” It brings to mind autumn Saturday mornings in Ann Arbor with the largest crowd in the largest stadium—106,000 maize and blue faithful. Then the voice of the announcer echoes across the multitude: “Band, take the field.” The drum cadence begins and the band prances out in double time, instruments held high. The drum major raises his baton and they break into the brilliant strains of the “Michigan Fanfare.” It’s the thrilling sound of trumpets in the morning.

That’s how I opened my first sermon on my first Sunday here. Little did I know that former Michigan band members Larry Price and Bob Stoner were ready to do backflips down the aisle, and that all the Spartans in the house were ready to call the Bishop and request a different preacher.

Ah, the sound of trumpets in the morning!

I’m with Colin Morris when he says, “Truth to tell, I seldom hear the sound of trumpets in the morning, the clarion call of victory, the clear bright sound of a brass fanfare. My faith is more like a bugle than a trumpet.”

The bugle, by contrast, is a humble instrument, maybe even vulgar by comparison. It is used as often for blowing retreat as for advance, not as grandiose and glorious as the trumpet, but still able to rally the troops and motivate action.

And I am familiar with the bugle as well as the trumpet. When he was past 80, my father-in-law, Burdette Stone, would awaken visitors to the house (especially his grandsons) with the sound of reveille played on his old Boy Scout bugle. Those octogenarian lips did not pucker as well as they once did, but it certainly had the power to rouse slumbering boys at 7:00 a.m.

The sound of the bugle. But what of the “Afternoon” in Morris’s title?
Afternoon is what he calls “flat time.” Not the freshness of morning or the glitter of night life, not the glory of a morning sunrise or the glow of an evening sunset. It’s ordinary time, the mundane of the day, flat time.

And isn’t that where most of us live most of our lives most of the time? Not the emotional high of an Easter morning. Not the silent hush of a Christmas Eve. Most of us live out our faith in ordinary days and average ways, the flat time, the afternoon of life.

**Our faith…more like a bugle than a trumpet.**
**Our lives…more like afternoon than morning.**

So Colin Morris concludes: “Mine has never been an adequate faith, but it’s the only faith I have to give away, so let the bugle sound in the afternoon of life!”

Whereas first sermons are meant to introduce the preacher, I suppose last sermons are meant to summarize the years, to raise up the last, lingering notes which I hope will continue to resound in the life of the congregation. So now that we truly have come to the afternoon of the our time together, what are the few modest bugle notes I would like to sound one more time?

The first note has to do with the ministry we share in our Methodist tradition. When John Wesley was asked to explain his practice of “field preaching”—moving out of the box, out of the pulpit, to share the good news—the answer he gave has echoed the Methodist movement ever since:

1. **“THE WHOLE WORLD IS MY PARISH”**

Central to my ministry and one of the strong commitments of this congregation is the deep conviction of a global mission: “The world is our parish.” From Prague to Pontiac to Panama, from Costa Rica to Cass Avenue, from here to Henderson Settlement and youth choir tours of England, this congregation has a global vision of ministry which reaches around the world.

Forty-five years ago, Judy and I were dating college students, yet to be engaged. She was considering an opportunity to go to Argentina as a short-term missionary (I suppose that encouraged me to getting moving on this relationship!) and I had been greatly influenced by a roommate who had grown up in Africa and Brazil as what we at Asbury College called an “MK,” missionary kid. Then during our first year in seminary and our first year of marriage, we took our first mission trip outside the U.S. to Colombia. In that first year of our marriage and ministry, we decided that wherever we served, the global mission of the church would be a part of our life and work.

Back then we had no idea that the journey would take us to two dozen countries—preaching in Mexico City and the British Midlands, worshiping in war-torn Angola and Zimbabwe or riding a donkey cart to a house church in Cuba. Looking back, the fascinating thing about that is that when we arrived at this small house church in God-knows-where Cuba, the woman who was leading it came to meet us wearing a tee-shirt that read “First United Methodist Church, Grand Rapids, MI.” Gary and Laurie Haller come from a church that has also had a long tradition of mission service.
Back then we had no idea our ministry would include serving the global church with the General Board, or multiple trips to Costa Rica, or a decade of service in Estonia. Back then we had no idea our full-time ministry would end in a church which is so deeply committed to sending teams around the world. But we look back now and give thanks for the joy of serving congregations with a global mission.

The first note on my feeble bugle: the whole world is our parish. The second note has to do with the message we proclaim…

2. FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT, “GOD IS FAITHFUL.”

The central theme of the Old Testament is the word of covenant. God is revealed in promises God makes and the promises God keeps. God is made known as a covenant-making God. God is literally known by the company he keeps: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of Sarah, Rebekah and Ruth. This God is faithful. In contrast to the capricious pagan gods around them, the people of Israel clung tenaciously to the belief in Yahweh, the God who can be trusted, the God who is faithful.

Judy and I have been blessed in so many ways in each place we have served, and in every place we have walked through the valley of the shadow as well. My first Sunday in my first appointment, after preaching my first sermon in three small churches, a woman came to me and said, “I’m sorry to tell you this, but my 24-year-old brother was found dead this morning—too much alcohol, diabetic seizure. Can you meet with us this afternoon to plan the funeral?” In my first year in ministry I had 19 funerals, and the Psalm that became an anchor for me faith:

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
Though the earth should change,
Though the mountains shake into the sea.
Be still and know that I am God.
The Lord of hosts is with us,
The God of Jacob is our refuge. (Psalm 46)

In my second appointment, when a gunshot killed a young man, it not only drove me to my knees, but convinced me of the need for gun control in this nation, an issue that is still with us. In my third appointment, the most difficult day of my ministry began with the word of an infant crib death and was followed by suicides in two separate families before nightfall. Through a host of tragedies in every church, I have long since given up on the ridiculous notion that “God has a reason for everything,” but deeper still I have become more and more convinced that in everything, God is our refuge. God is faithful.

The first time I preached this sermon followed the devastating tsunami in the Indian Ocean. I quoted Nathan Nettleton in Australia, who preached a sermon called “A Christmas Tsunami Lament.” In it he said:
Can we stand in the mud and debris of Banda Aceh or Phuket and speak of one who is called Emmanuel, God with us?

Any theology that can’t be preached in the presence of parents grieving over their slaughtered children isn’t worth preaching anywhere else.

Where was God when the wave hit? Wasn’t God right there bearing the brunt of it? Wasn’t God there clinging to his beloved child, only to be overwhelmed by the waves and have the child ripped from his arms? Wasn’t God there as he was when the surging flood of hatred battered and smashed his own son to death on a cross? (Nathan Nettleton, “A Christmas Tsunami,” Jan. 2, 2005, www.laughingbird.net)

One of my favorite hymns says it well:

*Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;*  
*There is no shadow of turning with thee;*  
*Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not;*  
*As thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.*  
*Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!*  
*Morning by morning new mercies I see;*  
*All I have needed, thy hand hath provided;*  
*Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!*

(United Methodist Hymnal, page 140)

The Old Testament note on my bugle: God is faithful. And the third note comes from the New Testament, the witness of the Gospels and the church through the ages:

3. **“JESUS IS LORD.”**

St. Paul proclaims it when he speaks of Jesus:

…who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even death upon the cross.

Therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The central creed of the early church was expressed in three simple words, “Jesus is Lord.” Over against the might of the Rome which demanded the pledge of allegiance, “Caesar is Lord,” this tiny band of disciples was bold to say, “We beg to differ—Jesus is Lord.” And that simple creed shook the Empire to its foundations. The older I get there is less and less of which I am certain, but the one thing I will bet my life and ministry on is the promise and presence of the living, Risen Christ. Jesus is Lord!
Over the years I have been introduced in many places by many people. One of the best introductions I’ve ever had came from Bishop Alfred Norris who was introducing me as the preacher for the Northwest Texas Annual Conference. A powerful African American preacher himself, Bishop Norris got a laugh as he rattled off my ridiculously long title: “The Rev. Dr. John E. Harnish is the Associate General Secretary of the Division of Ordained Ministry, Section of Elders and Local Pastors for the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church.” He frowned and raised his eyebrow, then he paused, and in his gravely voice he said, “But I want you to know, I know him as Jack, and I know he is a bureaucrat who loves Jesus.” And if I am going to be remembered for anything I would like to be remembered simply as Jack…a preacher who loves Jesus.

Lloyd C. Douglas, a well-known author and preacher of his generation, tells a story from his student days. At the time he lived on the third floor of an old rooming house. On the first floor lived a retired music teacher, now confined to his wheelchair. Douglas says every morning when he passed the old man’s apartment, he would stick his head in the door and ask, “What’s the good news today?” The old man would pick up his tuning fork and strike it on the arm of his wheelchair and respond, “That’s middle C. It was middle C yesterday and its middle C today. It will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat and the piano in the parlor is out of tune, but that’s middle C.”

St. Paul says “middle C” has sounded in Jesus Christ. He is Lord of the past, Lord of the present, and will be Lord a thousand years from now. The unchanging note of hope and faith in our constantly changing and uncertain world: Jesus Christ is Lord.

Well, there you have it. The few feeble notes which I hope have sounded in my ministry across the years. With Colin Morris I confess, “Mine has never been an adequate faith, but it is the only one I have to give away.” So let the bugle sound in the afternoon of life: The world is my parish, God is faithful, Jesus is Lord.

4. That’s where I began, and that’s where I would like to end, but let me add one more note to my tin horn: the note of gratitude.

I come to this day with incredible gratitude:

For a mother who planted the faith deep within us, and for a father who felt called to ministry, but sent his sons instead. For men and women in every church who believed in me and trusted me, forgave me and chastened me, but above all loved me and encouraged me to do my best for the Kingdom.

Andre Crouch said it best in a song:

How can I say thanks for the things you have done for me?
Things so undeserved that you do to prove your love for me.
The voices of a million angels could not express my gratitude.
All that I am, or ever hope to be,
I owe it all to you.
To God be the glory, to God be the glory,
To God be the glory for the things he has done.
With the blood he has saved me;
With his power he has raise me;
To God be the glory for the things he has done.

My father-in-law, Burdette the bugler, died in 1996. Not long before his death, he said he wanted me to preach his funeral. When I asked him what he wanted me to say, his eyes twinkled and he smiled and said, “Oh, you know…the one about the bugles.” Not many days later, on a glorious May morning, the bugle sounded for Burdette one last time. And to those of us who loved him, it sounded for all the world like taps, last call, the end of the day. But for him, for him it was reveille and the promise of a whole new dawn in the presence of the Risen Christ.

So let the bugle sound in the afternoon of life:

The world is my parish.
God is faithful.
Jesus is Lord.
Thanks be to God.