

Sermon Pentecost 17C
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Well, for those preachers out there trying to write a sermon during a hurricane, the words of 2nd Timothy, our 2nd lesson for today acted as a balm. They read: “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” Repeat that last part with me, so next time you’re in the midst of a storm, physically, or spiritually, you’ll have it committed to memory: “For God did not give us a spirit of fear but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

Through our Baptism, we have been given the gift of God within us, which is not, and never has been, a spirit of fear. Now, that doesn’t mean that it’s wrong to feel anxious or afraid. It would be difficult for anyone to ride out a storm on the magnitude of what we all just experienced, or of the magnitude that some of you are living through right now in your own lives without feeling a little bit of natural fear and anxiety. After all, we’re human. But we do not let that fear and anxiety get the best of us. Because we do not carry it alone - We have the Spirit. In prayer and humility we give our worries over to the Triune God, and rely on their power, their peace, and their love.

There’s a reason these words from 2nd Timothy were such a comfort in the storm. Paul knew a thing about adversity. He had been persecuted, he had been rejected, he knew pain, he had been shipwrecked, attacked and imprisoned, and he knew in all likelihood, his own death was imminent. Word had started going around, likely in response to Paul’s misfortune, that real leaders would be spared from suffering, that Christians with true faith would not endure hardships, but instead be spared by the “hedge of protection” around them.

Hmm... does any of that sound familiar? Do you ever hear that kind of language from Christians today? That the true believers, the truly blessed, are those living a life of ease, prosperity and lack of suffering? When I hear that kind of messaging, whether through Christians on social media or from letters written 1800 years ago, it makes me pause and wonder: How much does that sound like Jesus? How much does that version of “blessed” really sound like the Christ who died for you? The 2nd letter to Timothy offers Christian encouragement of a different sort. This letter was penned around the time of Paul’s martyrdom, and the exhortations for believers we hear in today’s reading are these:

- Do not be afraid, *even when things get scary.*
- Do not be ashamed, *even when the world shames you.*
- Do not turn away from suffering for the gospel.
- And do not forget to rely on God.

Instead of casting judgment on those experiencing adversity, the message is this: Do not be afraid. Do not see it as failure. Lean into suffering and trust in God. Why would the words of a more seasoned minister of the gospel to his younger protégé be framed in this way? Well, first,

they serve as a defense of Paul's own ministry. Paul suffered. It wasn't his failure, it was proof of his enduring faith. And secondly, they help Timothy know what to expect. If you're going to pick up this baton and run the race I've run, Paul says, expect adversity. Be prepared, and face it head on.

You see, in the life of discipleship, if we truly want to commit ourselves to following The Way of Christ, we need to be prepared for resistance. If we accept the inevitability of suffering, if we expect adversity, It won't be so bad. When we come to understand that it is just a part of the life of faith, it won't cause that cognitive dissonance that can come with suddenly experiencing the unexpected. If we as disciples, expect to be rejected, misunderstood or judged for the sake of the gospel, we won't live in shame. If we expect the unexpected, and know that whatever this life throws at us, God's got us, We won't live in fear. If we expect that our knowledge and abilities will fall short of the power of God, We won't resist relying on God, trusting in him, instead of leaning on our own understanding. But on the other hand, if we operation under the expectation that we will know it all, be able to do it all to rise to the top, to be celebrated and honored by this world, to always be in control, boy, will we be in for a surprise.

October has arrived, and so has the "spooky" season, Have you started to see the Halloween decorations going up? Who's going to Fright Nights at the farm? (Not me!) Standing in that line, you already start to get chills from the anticipation, When you get up close, you shiver at the sound of the screams, And entering in, your hair is standing on end, but what really gets you to jump out of your skin? It's the surprises! Just like the spooky statue on somebody's front porch that as soon as you get close, it's eyes light up and it starts to move! That's what really solicits the screams on trick-or-treat night, right?

All that is fun at Halloween, if you like that sorta thing. But encountering the unexpected in life, when you're not prepared sometimes that's not as much fun. Being caught off guard can really throw you for a loop. And there's always going to be things in life we'll never see coming, some good and some bad. But Paul's message today is: when it comes to the life of discipleship don't be surprised when people judge you. Don't be afraid, because you're not alone. Go into this thing with your eyes wide open. Rely on God. Receive his power and peace.

To answer Christ's call, means to take up our cross and do it willingly. To walk with Christ means, like Jesus, to expect resistance, Rejection and sacrifice. If we know Jesus, it shouldn't come as a surprise. And if we know Jesus, we do not bear it alone. Like him, we have the gift of God within us. We have the gift of the Spirit, who is a Spirit of power and of love and of self-control.

Wow, to someone who is unfamiliar with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, this all probably sounds like nails down a chalkboard. It is so antithetical to the self-reliant self-promoting attitude of this world. But to those of us who have, like Timothy, been taught by the Loises and the Eunices in our lives, the mentors of faith who have gone before us... to us, this message will sound as familiar as the old Sunday School songs they sang to us as little children.

We who have been shown the life of faith can have peace Because we know, and we trust that for us, Christ has already won the victory. He has won the victory over fear He has won the

victory over shame He has won the victory over suffering We are confident that, while the temporary anxieties and afflictions may affect us now, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” Christ, the firstborn of the resurrection, has made us more than conquerors. And he has gone before to prepare the way for us to live fully into that victory here, and in the life to come.

You see, Jesus has already welcomed us into his kingdom, although we are still living in *chronos* time, linear time. That’s why we still have to contend with the fear, rejection and suffering. But our victorious Lord Jesus, along with all the saints who have now departed from this world, are already living in *kairos* time, God’s time. In *kairos* time, all suffering has ended. In *kairos* time, the dawning kingdom of God has already come in its fullness, and every injustice has been undone and every inequity has been overcome and God has wiped away every tear from all faces.

In a paradoxical way, for those who believe, we exist in a reality where the kingdom has come in *kairos* time even while we continue to exist in *chronos* time. Because we believe in a God who is bigger than our day-to-day existence, bigger than our fears and hangups, bigger than our shame, our losses, and our suffering. The God in whom we live and breathe and have our being has already won the victory over all these things through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I have to admit that I had to step away from writing this sermon for awhile, because the wind and rain really began to intensify and I wasn’t able to focus on anything else but the storm. I was doing pretty good being able to master my fears, but when those winds started howling and the debris was raining down I started realizing I wasn’t dealing with it as well as I thought. But it just so happened that shortly after the strongest bands of the storm arrived, the clouds started clearing a little. The eye of the hurricane had arrived. And I had to run back to my manuscript. Because isn’t it always at the height of the storm when we receive the grace we need? Nobody wants to be in a storm so intense it takes all your energy just to survive it. But isn’t that exactly when God’s grace arrives in a way you won’t be able to miss it, just like the eye of the hurricane?

So when the storm is threatening your peace, when the winds of change are blowing, or the clouds starting to make your world seem dark, remember 2nd Timothy:

- Do not be afraid. *God’s grace is sufficient for you.*
- Do not be ashamed. *You have a place in the kingdom.*
- Do not turn away from suffering. *You are walking in the footsteps of Christ.*
- And do not forget to rely on God.