

“Remaining Faithful in Difficult Times” based on 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:5, Psalm 116
Delivered on June 6, 2021, at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Today’s reading comes from the Apostle Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. This whole letter is Paul reaching out to a church he founded but has since rejected him. This is his attempt to reconcile with the church and rebuild their relationship. This letter was written after the Apostle had been imprisoned, and now, in his temporary freedom, he hopes to visit them again, but to do so, he is trying to ensure that he will be welcomed, by tying their struggles with each other, to the deep theological truths in God’s word, through the suffering of Israel in Egypt, and also, Jesus’s death on the cross.

Getting to this point has not been easy – Paul talks later in Chapter 11 about his struggles. He says he has worked faithfully for God and yet, has been in prison numerous times, and even beaten more times than he can count, including five times with whips, three times with rods, and even one time, he was stoned, but survived. He mentions that he was shipwrecked, and while always traveling, he has faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from foreigners, dangers in the cities, dangers in the countryside, dangers at sea, and dangers from false believers. He has been exhausted from work. He has been hungry and thirsty, even left cold and naked.

By the time he is writing this letter, any reasonable person might ask of him – Is this all worth it? If you are an apostle and life is this bad, why do you stay faithful? Why would you want to keep going? Wouldn’t life be easier if you just gave up? Why haven’t you abandoned the faith and gone back to your old life?

Paul has a couple of answers for the people – first, he believes God will rescue him. He alludes to this in his quotation of Psalm 116 in the start of our reading today. (I love to show you where the New Testament builds on the Old Testament). This is known as an Egyptian Hallel Psalm, or a Praise Psalm from the Exodus. In it, the writer says they believed, or were faithful, and have spoken, even after having been skeptical of others about God’s works, thinking all humans are liars. But the Psalmist writes that God’s goodness is not something that anyone can truly repay, so the writer will drink of the cup of salvation, the fourth and final cup of the Passover, and be faithful before the people, because the death of the holy, is costly, or precious, in God’s eyes.

This is the backdrop of the paragraphs in Paul’s letter that we read today. This is the assumed background he trusts his readers would have known, but which we often miss. For Paul, faith in Jesus as the incarnation of God is not a new faith, or new religion, but it is the complete expression of his lifelong Jewish faith in the One True God. And so, he ties his struggles to those of the people of Israel in Egypt, and then ties them to a new Exodus, one from sin and death, which comes because Jesus has died for us on the cross. This is the second answer: that God’s rescue, is not merely something that happened long ago, but it is something happening right now because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

For Paul, the brutality which he has suffered at the hands of Roman and Jewish authorities, and even the rejection he now faces from his beloved church in Corinth, are not signs of Paul's unfaithfulness – they are not punishments for sin. Nor are they signs of God's unfaithfulness – an implication that God is now absent. Instead, all of that he describes as slight momentary troubles. A true understatement. These troubles are working to produce great and eternal glory for God.

This week, as you now know, I informed our Session that I have accepted a new call, to be the pastor of a church in North Carolina, which elected me today as their new pastor and head of staff. This church is not far from where my wife Claire's parents live, and so, for her and also for me and our children, this is an opportunity to be much nearer to family.

As I did three years ago, when you chose me to be your pastor, I truly believe the Holy Spirit is at work in this moment, not just for me, but also, at work for you, the Presbyterian Church at Absecon. We have done tremendous work over the past three years, restoring the foundation of our church to rest on our polity, which is meant to empower you, the people to be the church. This is why I keep saying the church is not the building, it's not the pastor, but it is you.

I believe that my background in administration and my deep love for the story of scripture, has suited this church well and your session is poised to do some great things, as they look to be more active in the community around you, and encourage more activity in the community of believers already here, to build and grow in the connection between members and friends, as you all seek Christ together, as the church is called to do.

Truly, I am sad that now, after we have rewritten bylaws, studied church ministry and growth, restored powers and duties in the hands of Session, and advanced our technology, now is when we will be leaving – as you are poised to enter a new chapter, to find your place as people called by God that this community needs. It feels like I've readied a house for renovations to sell it, and now I look back and see what a great house it is.

However, I also believe the Holy Spirit is leading the way again for this change. Just as God desires my abilities at the church in Western North Carolina, so too, there is a pastor whom the Holy Spirit is preparing to serve here, with a new vision to build on what we've done and lead you forward.

This has not been an easy last few years together, albeit perhaps easier than Paul's ministry, but still, we have as a church suffered great loss, both in the pillars who have died, and in the members who have moved away, themselves to be with family. We have seen successes and failures in the things we have tried to do. In this past year, we endured something completely new to us, for never has the church had to endure a global pandemic, requiring us to make such drastic changes and leaps, just to continue being the church at all.

Three years ago, I did not think we would be adding a 'Worship Technology Specialist,' but the future of all churches will be increasingly dictated by their online presence in the digital Babylon. Having Frank Nale on staff to fill this role on Sundays and beyond, will be a huge asset

for you moving forward that will bear fruit. I think that this is a forward thinking move by your Session, and I could not be happier with them hiring Frank, who will ensure that your technology is up to date, and your outreach online continues strong. Every church needs a Frank Nale on staff, and you now have him. He and Rick will be a great team.

I say this to assure you, as Paul assured the Corinthians, that struggle in life is absolutely inevitable, but how we handle that struggle is the sign of Christ's presence and the Spirit in us. Nonbelievers and believers alike endure suffering, and also good things happen to both alike, but the believer has hope, a hope that is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Embarking now on a second pastoral search in less than six years, is not a sign of any mistakes or sins, nor is it a sign of God abandoning you, but it's the reality of the broken world we live in. Yet God is at work in us to produce a weight of glory through the cross. This is not the time to look at what is visible, but to see what cannot be seen by our eyes. Indeed, we are to look at what can only be recognized in faith – God's presence. Yes, the same God who shared in our humanity is with us now in the Holy Spirit.

Friends, it is in the moments of our deepest struggles that we must turn to God, and have the eyes of our hearts opened to the incredible gospel truth, that the One True God, who is the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, shared in our humanity through the Son in the person of Jesus Christ. God the Son lived as we live in this broken world, in solidarity with us, and die on the cross, bearing the weight of sin and death, only to be raised to new life. This life is shared with us, first in the presence of the Holy Spirit with us, pouring out God's love in our hearts, and in the new creation yet to come, when all will be made new.

Yes, at the present moment, you see, we are groaning, as we long for this new creation. We often pray, 'Come Lord Jesus.' We long to put on our new heavenly building not made by human hands, that will clothe us. For our house, our body, is covered by a tent, a tabernacle of God's presence, and this is not just our individual selves, but the church itself, all of us. We groan still under a great weight, but it is ours to wear now, because by wearing this good news through our faith, what is doomed to die below it – this earthly life – may be swallowed up with God's life, for which the Spirit is the first gift or down payment.

And so, as we embark on these last few weeks together, I will continue to urge you, to remain faithful in difficult times, because the good life as the world defines it, is not a sign of faithfulness. Rather, faithfulness is revealed in our struggles. It is revealed in how we wear our tents of eternity now in our words and deeds. This theology, that Paul lays on the church in Corinth, and which I relay to you now and have in every sermon, is not mere instruction for the sake of knowledge, but the reason for our ministry of reconciliation.

The death of Christ on the cross and the resurrection that inaugurates the Kingdom in full, demands that we recognize God at work, God at our side, in the most difficult times. It is our answer to when some might say, 'why don't you just give up the faith?' For it is in this truth of the Triune God and the good news of Jesus, these theological underpinnings, that we find reconciliation. By this we reveal the new age to come, that weight of glory, by which we

navigate life in this broken world, and stand out by how we relate to each other, and how we relate to the world around us.

If Christ, the meeting place of heaven and earth, the one human with all the goodness of the one true God, can reveal love in his own suffering, and the apostles, Paul included, can do the same, then indeed how we face adversity, reveals God's love to those who see it in us. In our hearts, let us pray the prayer that Lauren Daigle sang on the 'Voice,' and let each of us truly believe that 'nobody loves me better,' And now ask God to hold on to us, so that in our challenges, we trust in the heavenly tent that covers us, because everything we need to persevere, is found in the cross and resurrection. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:5 (NTE) We have the same Spirit of ***faith*** as you see in what is ***written***, ‘I ***believed***, and so I spoke.’ We too believe, and so we ***speak***, because we know that the God who raised the ***Lord*** Jesus will ***raise*** us with ***Jesus*** and present us with you. It’s all because of you, you see! The ***aim*** is that, as ***grace*** abounds through the ***thanksgiving*** of more and more ***people***, it will overflow to God’s ***glory***. For this ***reason*** we don’t lose ***heart***. Even if our ***outer*** humanity is ***decaying***, our inner ***humanity*** is being renewed ***day*** by day. This slight momentary ***trouble*** of ours is working to ***produce*** a weight of glory, ***passing*** and surpassing everything, ***lasting forever***; for we don’t look at the things that can be seen, but at the things that can’t be seen. After all, the things you can see are here ***today*** and gone ***tomorrow***; but the things you can’t see are everlasting. For we know that if our ***earthly*** house, our present ‘***tent***’, is destroyed, we have a ***building*** from God, a ***house*** no human ***hands*** have ***built***: it is ***everlasting***, in the heavenly places. At the present ***moment***, you see, we are groaning, as we long to put on our ***heavenly*** building, in the ***belief*** that by putting it on we won’t turn out to be naked. Yes: in the ***present*** ‘tent’, we ***groan*** under a great ***weight***. But we don’t want to put it off; we want to put on something else on top, so that what is ***doomed*** may be swallowed up with ***life***. It is ***God*** who has been at ***work*** in us to do this, the God who has given us the ***Spirit*** as the first instalment and ***guarantee***.