

Psalm 46
2 Corinthians 1:3-11

23rd Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 28, 2018

Dealing with Adversity

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm today is a communal hymn expressing confidence and trust in God as a sure refuge and help in time of trouble. Fear has no grip on those who heed the instruction. Listen to these words from Psalm 46...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

Our Epistle Lesson opening follows the usual address in Paul's letters. Then he speaks of suffering and consolation; of God's rescue from peril. Listen to these words from 2 Corinthians 1:3-11...

Sermon

There are times when we address ourselves to some great challenge, undertake some worthy resolve, or give ourselves to some just and holy cause. We hold nothing back. We put all our heart and soul and strength to the task. But in spite of everything we do, there is failure. It appears that our efforts have been wasted. We may become entangled in defeat and despair, ready to give up.

We have knocked at the door of opportunity 'til our knuckles are raw, but no one comes to the door and it is not opened. Or we're searching for renewal of health; we follow the doctor's instructions, but health does not come. Or there is that one person or thing we have identified above all others that will bring us happiness. But he or she or it disappears.

Each of us finds it the common experience of our lives to face loss, disappointment, frustration, and failure. Robert Browning once said that the reason why people fail is because they are unwilling to pay the price. That is sometimes true. But sometimes we pay the price and still fail.

In such a time we may be prone to settle back in grim despair, shrug our shoulders and say, “What’s the use?” Some spend much time feeling sorry for themselves. Some are seized with panic and become hysterical. Others become overwhelmed with cynicism and bitterness.

There is the teacher in a difficult school situation who with great enthusiasm and devotion, gives herself to her little group. But many of the children act as if they couldn’t care less about learning. There’s no support from the parents. There are little funds for education. The teacher is tempted to say, “Why should I care; no one else seems to.”

There is the businessman who holds to high standards of integrity and conduct. He turns neither to the right nor the left. But all around him are those with lower standards who seem to advance and profit. It’s easy to think, “Why should I continue living by this high code of ethics? Why not live by their code and get what I can?”

There is the public official who still believes a call to office is not only a great privilege, but also a great responsibility—a public trust to work for the good of all the people. But he finds there are those less scrupulous in office, who are led by special interest groups, and thereby seem to guarantee the continuation of their positions. It’s easy for him to rationalize, “Why should I not simply play the game as they do? Why not just take advantage of whatever niceties this office can provide me?”

People can be staggered by the disappointments that undermine, the sickness that prevails, the happiness that vanishes, the closed door of opportunity, the light that goes out. And there are dark nights of the soul for everyone. They come to all alike, young and old, rich and poor, male and female, black and white. Circumstances beyond our control and which we could never have foreseen.

What do we do when life tumbles in? How can we face and deal with adversity? Let me offer a few thoughts.

First of all, I think it's important that we not seek to deny the circumstances. Courage is not the opposite of despair. Courage is the will and capacity to move ahead in spite of despair. We can see this as a time to reevaluate our goals, values, and purposes. And to create opportunity out of adversity.

We might find help in studying individuals who overcame failure. A young man ran for the legislature in Illinois, and was badly beaten. He next entered business, failed, and spent seventeen years of his life paying off the debts of a worthless partner. He was in love with a beautiful young woman to whom he became engaged, but she died. Re-entering politics, he ran for Congress, but was badly defeated. He then tried to get an appointment to the United States Land Office, but failed. He became a candidate for the United States Senate, and lost. Two years later he was defeated by Stephen Douglas. One failure after another—bad failures—great setbacks; but in the face of all this, he kept on trying and became one of the greatest leaders in American history. Yes, it was Abraham Lincoln.

A number of years ago a little boy suffered an accident. At age 5 his legs were terribly burned by a fire. The doctors said he would be crippled for the rest of his life. But they underestimated the heart and soul of little Glenn Cunningham.

His mother tells of how she used to push back the curtain and look out the window and see Glenn as he would reach up and take hold of an old plow. With one hand on each handle he began to make those snarled and twisted legs function. And with every step a step of pain, Glenn Cunningham began to walk. And pretty soon he began to trot, and before long he was running. And in 1934 he set a world record in the mile run—4:06.8.

Life is not always fair, but that didn't stopped Tony Christiansen of Tauranga, New Zealand, from persevering and making his dreams come true. When Christiansen was 9 years old, he was hit by a train and lost both of his legs. "I asked myself why this had to happen to me," said Christiansen. He found no answer to his question. But slowly, he began to accept what had happened and determined get on with his life.

Seven months after he was released from the hospital, he began taking swimming lessons. He took it one stroke at a time, and five months later, he swam a mile. At 17 years old, Christiansen faced another great challenge—finding a job. He said, "I decided I wanted to be a sign painter, so I went around to all of the sign painting businesses in town and asked for a job." It was three months before someone was willing to give him a chance.

He later owned that company for 13 years and turned it into one of the most successful sign companies in New Zealand. When he took over it had a staff of two and a turnover of \$90,000 a year. It was to become a multi-million dollar company. "I've lost my legs, not my passion and desire to succeed in life," said Christiansen.

Sometimes God works through others to lift us up. Sometimes he works in us. He leads us to recognize who we are and whose we are. He leads us to recognize our limitations, but he also leads us to recognize our potential. He gives a peace beyond understanding. A peace that the world cannot give, a peace that the world cannot take away.

And through it all we need to value ourselves, in spite of defeat and failure. God does.

Years after the fall of man, the Psalmist said:

What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor. (8:4-5)

Jesus said the reconciliation of the Prodigal Son with his father was a result of the son's coming to himself. That is a great compliment and affirmation of the human person God has created. "When he came to himself."

Without a basic faith in human potential, it will be very hard for us to walk the long road of faith and hope and love. To be sure, people can be very disappointing. Sometimes the most selfless can give evidence of selfishness. The most compassionate can show signs of callousness. The most saintly can be quite unloving or stagger across the threshold of indiscretion. But in spite of everything, we can still know ourselves as children of God, created in his image. Jesus had such faith in people. He took a tax-collector and made him a disciple. Likewise, he took fishermen, and made them fishers of men. Jesus took a skeptic named Saul, a persecutor of the Christians, and turned him into Paul, a missionary and proclaimer of Christ's universal and eternal love.

In one sense this was the glory of Christ. Enabling people to be what they could be. Enabling them to face and deal with life. He dragged people out of sorrow and sin. He invited the weak to come and find strength, those who labor and are haven laden to find rest. He brought hope to the hopeless. Light to those who sit in darkness.

My friends, let us have faith that no matter what our circumstances, God loves us, is with us and for us. Let us open the windows of our souls and let his light shine in the darkness and believe that the darkness cannot overcome us. That nothing can separate us from his love which

we have come to know in Christ Jesus. Let us trust that God will work with us for good, for our good, for his good, in the midst of all circumstances. Our troubles may not magically disappear. But God will give us the strength and guidance we need to overcome them.

In the ancient world, it was thought that the mountains held the dry land in place and held up the sky. The worst thing imaginable was for the mountains to crumble or shake. But for the psalmist, even if the worst happens, still God can be trusted, and therefore fear can be overcome.

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 in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

So, when life tumbles in. When doors close. When the lamps begin to dim and the lights begin to flicker. When hope no longer sees a star. When we experience a dark night of the soul. Let us accept our reality. Evaluate our lives. Find opportunity in the midst of adversity. Let us look for sources of inspiration in others. We are children of a loving heavenly Father. His love is from everlasting to everlasting. His strength is found to be perfect in weakness. His perfect love can overcome fear. His light will guide. His anchor will hold.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.