

Reasons For Courage

We have already heard and proclaimed God's good news in many ways this morning. We have confirmed God's gift of Christ for us all: women and men, young, old and youthful again. We have joined with the psalmist in the affirmation that God hears our voices when we cry out for mercy, that God saves us when we call upon God's name. We have rejoiced in the way that God enabled us to follow God's calling on our lives as a community of faith through the completion of the Shepherd's Garden project. I still feel the echo of the awesome power of God when I stop and consider how this little congregation, where we rarely have more than 40 in worship, including the little ones, was able with God's help to enter into an impossible dream of building 40 units of housing, one for every one of us who is here most Sundays. We have received the commendation of a merit award from American Baptist Homes and Caring ministries this morning, my sisters and brothers, and that is right and good for you all kept the faith and stayed the course even when it seemed that all around us opposed us and that the dream was indeed impossible. But let us not forget that the intricate coming together of opportunity and need, of land and location, of old friends and new, yes, even of the appropriate cooperation of church and state, could only have happened through the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Together this morning, we have given thanks for God's powerful movement in our lives through gifts large and small and we have asked with confidence for God's continued intervention in our lives and in our world. We have together confessed our shortcomings before God and this company and we have heard the good news of God's forgiveness, the mercy that is new every morning, the grace that is as sure as the rising of the sun. And now, from the Scriptures, we have heard the challenge of Jesus on our lives and the reassurance of Paul that no matter where that challenge leads us, God will always, always be with us. Jesus told those who listened to him that those who were willing to lose everything for his sake would indeed gain all. Paul confirmed that what we have gained through the work of Christ and through our response to God's free gift is the love of the very Creator of all.

Since we have already heard, sung and spoken the Good News in these powerful ways and since we will shortly come together with Christians around the world and through the ages in one of our most treasured symbols of that same Good News, my comments on these two remarkable passages will be short. Sometimes, when verses are so well known, when their message is so crystal clear, I think we preachers are foolish indeed to attempt much commentary on them. But let me offer a few quick thoughts about the application for us as Good Shepherd Baptist Church that have been on my heart this week.

First of all, let me add my words of praise for you to those of Rev. Brokaw. Some 10 years ago, you all entered into an audacious and sacrificial plan for this little church. Of your own free will, you gave away half of the property which this church had stewarded for forty years. With it, you gave away dreams that stretched back at least that long of a very different Good Shepherd Baptist Church, one with a physical plant that would be the envy of other worshipping communities, one which would be a booming powerhouse of spiritual and political vigor. You sacrificed that dream of community prestige for the sake of the welfare of others, you willingly lost that future, and the result was that this tiny congregation became sought out by the politicians who seek to align themselves with true community leadership, by the press who look for the opinions of those they believe have impact, even by some of our neighbors who, if they thought of us all before, regarded us with some suspicion. You may not be as aware of these

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approaches as I am but let me assure you, as the guy who answers the phones here six days a week, that they have happened and are continuing to happen. In being willing to lose your lives as what the world would consider representatives of the power of God, you have found life in symbolizing God's true power of self-giving love.

I also want to commend you for your ongoing willingness to sacrifice life as a group in the form of comfort. By ones and twos, in small groups and in larger groups, I have been talking with you all about next steps in the future of Good Shepherd Baptist. I have found that as a body, you agree with our brother Lynn Melby who is fond of telling us that doing the same things and expecting different results is a good definition of insanity. In our conversations together, you have expressed your willingness to undergo continued change for the sake of doing the sacred work of extending the Beloved Community. But, as we all know, change can be hard. It means dying to what is familiar in order to step into the uncertainty of the future. So even as I commend your willingness, let me warn you that there will inevitably be bumps ahead as we explore God's calling on us in the ever-shifting ethnic, political and demographic landscape of Lynnwood and environs. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, "When Christ calls a (person), he bids (them) come and die," he wasn't talking about going gentle into that good night. He was talking about struggle and pain. He was talking about taking up your cross.

It sounds pretty scary, doesn't it? Even with Jesus' brief reassurance that "those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it," the idea of taking up our cross, of making radical, life-altering change is daunting. I am so glad that Holy Wisdom led those who devised the Revised Common Lectionary to pair this challenging word from Jesus with the apostle Paul's most beautiful, most soaring affirmation of the certainty of God's love for us. Paul reminds us that no matter what stones may be in our path, no matter who may rise against us in opposition, no matter what price the world may exact from us for our attempt to follow the path of peace and love and self-sacrifice, ultimately, we have nothing to fear. If we fashion our lives to stand with the Creator of All, who can stand against us? In the words of the old gospel song, "it took a miracle of love and grace... to put the stars in place... to hang the world in space."

It is that love and grace, Paul reminds us, from which nothing can separate us. Not a loss of land, not a loss of comfort, not a loss of power, not a loss of life. If we should falter in our calling, God waits with patient love for us to find our way again. If we hesitate, we are not lost. All the more reason then, that we should move forward with boldness and with joy. God will not always provide us with a smooth path into the future. Instead, it is our hard and blessed work to prepare the way of the Lord, as God continues to shape the Creation into the Beloved Community. We are the ones called to make straight in the desert a highway for our God so that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together. We have work to do together, my friends, and the love of God will support us every step of the way.

And even if we should die, even if, in the eyes of the world, our efforts should come to nothing, we have the promise of the resurrection before us. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." And so we come to the time when we, each month, remember his death and celebrate the life which it brought to us. It can be a difficult life, to be sure, a life full of peril

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and disappointment for a time, a life in which we have to be ready to die with Christ. But it is also a life in which we rise with him, a life full and abundant, a life that never ends. Our life as followers of Christ, our life as Good Shepherd Baptist Church, is one in which we must take up our crosses but it is also, o sweet promise, a life in which the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the companionship of the Holy Spirit is ours every day of our lives and beyond. Amen.