



Sermons from Poland Presbyterian Church

“Knocked Down but Never Knocked Out”

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2 Corinthians 4:7-18

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**“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but
not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.....”**

-2 Corinthians 4:8 (NRSV)

Let us pray:

God, we pray that you will speak to us today as you have spoken to your people in the past. We have come today filled with concerns and worries, hopes and dreams, and we are hoping to hear your voice, your word to us. Give us the grace to hear, and having heard, the grace to respond, to become the people we were created to be. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

Let me begin with an observation, one might say, of comparative religion. I understand that in the tradition and liturgies of the Greek Orthodox Church, our brethren in the East, when a child is baptized – and by “child” I mean an infant, not a seven-year-old but a real infant, literally still damp – after the baptism has been performed, the minister or priest or bishop takes his very large pectoral cross and forcefully strikes the little child on its breast, so hard it leaves a mark, and so hard that it hurts the child and the child screams.

In the West, we'd call that child abuse; in the West we give the child roses. But in the Eastern Church they do this.

Why? To indicate that the child who has been baptized into Christ must bear the cross, and that the cross is a sign not of ease or of victory or of prosperity or of success, but of sorrow, suffering, pain, and death; and by it those things are overcome.

It is important to remember that. The symbol of our Christian faith is this very cross that you see on that holy table, carved and hung on that wall, worn around the necks of many of us and held in honor and esteemed by all of us; and it stands to remind us of the troubles of the world that placed our Savior upon it for sins that he did not commit. We Christians, therefore, like those Greek Orthodox babies, ought to expect trouble, turmoil, and tribulation as the normal course of life. And yet how often we fall into the false belief that somehow it should be otherwise.

But God does not spare us from turmoil. God strengthens us *for* turmoil. Indeed, God strengthens us *through* turmoil. The whole record of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, and the whole experience of the people of God – your experience and mine included – suggest that faith is forged on the anvil of human adversity. No adversity; no faith. Trouble, turmoil, tribulation, and temptation: that's the given; it's something we can all expect. And what is to be our response?

Our Jewish brethren begin the new year – the ancient, Jewish new year, that is – by celebrating the Day of Atonement. They begin the new year with what in the Jewish faith is called the great “Days of Awe.” When the Jewish people celebrate these Days of Awe and begin their new year and atone for their sins, they always remember two things. First, they remember the troubles and the tribulations through which they have been, and they recite the history not of their victories but of their sorrows and their troubles. They remind themselves and one another, and everybody else, of how they have been formed and forged through the experience of trial and tribulation. They remember those things.

The second thing they remember is how the Lord delivered them out of those troubles and helped them to endure and bear and eventually overcome them. They are reminded of that, and they remind themselves of it over and over and over again. That's also much of what the Sabbath in Jewish practice is about: remembrance of God's deliverance. And it is said: “It is not the Jew who keeps the Sabbath, but the Sabbath which keeps the Jew.”

The history of the Jews in the world is not a history of escape from trouble, as you well know; would that it were, but it is not.

I am currently reading a book entitled *The Life of Meaning: Reflections of Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World*, which is a compilation of interviews from national public radio's Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly over the past 10 years or so. One of the interviews was of the late rabbi-scholar Arthur Hertzberg. Commenting on the holocaust and the whole history of Jewish suffering, Rabbi Hertzberg remarked, “At the end of the Book of Job, Job rebuilds his life. To me, the miracle of Jewish history as a whole is our capacity to begin after tragedy, after disaster. It is this capacity to begin over again that is for me the closest I can come to God's finger.”

Isn't that something?

In our text this morning from 2 Corinthians 4 St. Paul bears unambiguous witness to inner strength amidst outer turmoil. I hope you heard – really heard, truly listened to – that lesson we read just a moment ago.

Let me read a verse of it again to you – this time in J.B. Phillip's pungent prose. Listen to what St. Paul says: "*We are handicapped on all sides*" – a very fashionable translation of the word, but apt – "*but we are never frustrated. We are puzzled,*" Paul says, "*but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone, and....*" – this fourth part is the part I like the most – "*we may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out.*" (2 Corinthians 4:8, Phillips).

Now, Paul is not an abstract theologian. He speaks from the experience of a frustrated but not defeated believer. This is not the "How to be leaders and win" sort of stuff, the kind of CEO book that they trot out in Business School and that you see lining the shelves of the leadership section at Barnes and Noble. – The kind of book used in motivational seminars. No. And it's not inspirational fluff either. If you are looking for something to read because you're feeling stressed, it's easy to turn to books of cheap inspiration and handy-dandy aphorisms; it's easy to look for feel-good and no-stress and lots-of-gain-and-no-pain kinds of books. They're all out there, but if you want to read something really useful when stressed, read the letters of Paul.

Read them and weep! Read them and rejoice! Read them and understand that neither you nor I are the first people in the world ever to face sorrow, death, frustration, or terror: we are not the first, and there is a record of coping here that is not merely of coping but of overcoming.

Remember that. Read the letters of Paul.

When you look at that fourth chapter in 2 Corinthians, the chapter with which we are working this morning, you will see that St. Paul is dealing with something very real -- a reality that believers have always been forced to face.

"In the world," says the apostle John, "we shall have tribulation.'

In times of prosperity it is easy to make prosperity our religion, to imagine that we can do without faith and religion altogether. When turmoil happens to others we can be mildly empathetic, perhaps even sympathetic, and maybe even say, "There but for the grace of God go I"; but when turmoil hits *us*, when *we* are knocked flat, when all of our securities and our cherished illusions are challenged to the breaking point and break, then comes the great question we must both ask and answer: what is left when everything we have is taken from us?

What is left when everything you have is taken from *you*?

That's the big question
and (I am quite sure) you know the answer.
I don't have to tell you.

God.

God is there, where God always is, where God is most needed – in trouble, sorrow, sickness, adversity, and even in death itself.

Isn't that Luther's point in his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"?

*Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.*

Remember too the old hymn "How Firm a Foundation":

*Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed!
For I am thy God and will give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee,
and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.*

Those hymns weren't written yesterday. They weren't written by people who did not know turmoil. They were written by people who in the midst of outer turmoil had inner strength; who, having been knocked down weren't knocked out!

Why? Because in the most terrible moments of time they found that God is where God always is – *by the side* of those who need him.

--not in front to lead,
not behind to push,
not above to protect,
but *beside* to get us through.

"Beside us to guide us/Our God with us joining" – as another old hymn verse phrases it.

We need to remember that when we're feeling alone, and up against it. We're not alone, and we're not powerless.

In the Book of Common Prayer there is a beautiful prayer, a beautiful prayer of collect that begins, "God of all comfort...." If you didn't know better, that would sound like mere consolation, like something merely soothing. But do you know the actual meaning of the word *comfort*? If you don't, you're about to. It means "to fortify; to strengthen; to

give courage, even power,” and not merely consolation. The God of all comfort is the one who supplies what we most lack when we most need it.

This inner strength isn't simply stoic endurance and perseverance; it isn't simply a form of mind over matter. It's not either of those. It's the sure conviction that God has placed us in the world to do the work of life, and not of death.

That's why Paul continues here here: *“We're always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.”* (or in J.B. Phillips trenchant translation of Paul's words here): *“We are always facing death but this means that we know more and more of life”* (2 Corinthians 4:11, Phillips).

How do we experience that?

In a conversation this past week one of you shared with me your experience of having gone through a difficult time health-wise, and how you wanted to, as part of your process of healing, give to others. I thought that quite wonderful. You said that in helping others you found yourself strengthened, yourself growing stronger.

A story is told by Dr. Ernest Gordon, for many years dean of the chapel at Princeton, and more famous because of his book about his captivity on the River Kwai during World War II. In that Japanese prison camp, Ernest Gordon said, he and his fellow British who were captives were initially very religious, reading their Bibles, praying, singing hymns, witnessing to and encouraging each other and testifying to their faith, and hoping and expecting that God would reward them and fortify them for their faith by freeing them or at least mitigating their captivity.

God didn't deliver, however, and the men became both disillusioned and angry, and some even faithless. They gave up on the outward display of their faith.

But after a while, Gordon says, the men, responding to the needs of their fellows – caring for them, protecting the weaker ones, and in some cases dying for one another – began to discern something of a spirit of God in their midst.

It wasn't a revival of religion in the conventional sense, but rather the discovery that religion/faith was not what you believed but what you did for others when it seemed that you could do nothing at all.

It was compassion in other words that gave them their inner strength, and it was from their inner strength that their compassion came.

The longer I live the more I become convinced that inner strength, that the ability to get up when we're knocked down is not simply the capacity to endure, but the capacity to give.

It just seems to be the case that the more we give, the more we are able to draw in – strength that is. And this strength is in one sense our own, but in another sense it is not our own. It is the strength that God gives us – to you, to me, -- as we care for others, as we show the spirit of Jesus. The power of God’s spirit fortifies us.

So,
if you’re going through a time of turmoil,
if you’re going through a time of tribulation and stress:
seek the inner strength that helps you
 not only to endure but to overcome.

Remember times when God has been there for you in the past, when God saw you through and delivered you. And then, do not look for what you can *get*: look rather for what you have been given, and for what you can *give*.

Closing Prayer

*Almighty God, our help in ages past,
 and our hope for years to come,
 our shelter from the stormy blast
 and our eternal home,
we pray for inner strength to face outer turmoil.
Help us to remember
 that you are ever beside those in need,
 and that you will give aid;
 that you will strengthen and help and cause us to stand;
 such that even when we are knocked down, we are never knocked out --
 that we can get up, and begin again.
In the strong name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*