

Keep the Faith

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, October 23, 2022.

2 Timothy 4:6-18

Over the past few weeks, I've been preaching from First and Second Timothy, which, along with Titus, are known collectively as the Pastoral Letters, because they are concerned with matters of pastoral leadership and the oversight of churches. The three letters claim to be written by the apostle Paul, but most Biblical scholars believe that it is unlikely Paul wrote them himself. Writing in the name of one's esteemed teacher or leader was not at all unusual in the first and second centuries. If, indeed, someone did write these letters in the name of Paul -- sometime after his death presumably -- it took tremendous imagination for that writer to put himself in Paul's shoes, to write from Paul's point of view, and to do so with such detail.

Second Timothy is written as a letter from prison. Paul is being held in Rome, "chained like a criminal." He refers to enduring hardships and being deserted by his friends and colleagues in his time of trial. "At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me," he says. "Demas . . . has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me."

What's more, Paul is nearing the end of his life. "I am already being poured out as a libation," he says, "and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Indeed, Paul had lived a full life. He started out with the name, Saul, and was a persecutor of the early followers of Jesus. But then, one day on the road to Damascus, Saul encountered the risen Christ as a blinding light and a voice from heaven. His

vision of Christ left him blind for three days. After regaining his sight, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and was baptized and became an instrument chosen by God to bring Jesus' "name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel." Saul's encounter with the risen Christ brought about a radical transformation in him. Saul, one of the most brutal persecutors of the church, became Paul, one of the church's greatest advocates.

After his dramatic conversion, Paul spent the rest of his life, more than 20 years, as a missionary, spreading Christianity across Mediterranean Europe. He traveled from city to city -- through what are now Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Italy -- preaching the good news of Jesus, the Christ, and starting churches everywhere he went.

It was not easy. It was a "fight," as Paul puts it, not just figuratively, but often literally. Paul had enemies. One of them he names in this passage: "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds." We don't know what this Alexander did to cause Paul harm, but it was bad enough for Paul to want God to pay him back with divine justice, and it was so serious that Paul felt a need to warn Timothy about him: "You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message."

Paul met all kinds of opposition and resistance during his missionary journeys. Listen to him recount to the church in Corinth the labors, imprisonments, floggings, and dangers he faced as a missionary of the Lord: "Five times I have received . . . forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked."

Paul put up with a great deal of hardship. Nevertheless, with all that he went through, he never gave up. He fought the good fight. He persevered. He kept on keeping on. Like a marathon runner, he endured to the end. He “finished the race.” He “kept the faith.”

And then, near the end of his life, he was in prison, abandoned and almost alone. But he didn't fall into despair. His faith sustained him: “the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.” Like Daniel in the lion's den, Paul “was rescued from the lion's mouth.” Paul had great trust and confidence in God's abiding presence: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

In addition, Paul still had an extended community of friends and colleagues to which he could appeal for support. In this letter, he asks Timothy to do his best to come and join him in Rome and to bring Mark with him. He also asks that his cloak, his books, and, above all, his parchments be brought to him in prison.

We may not face abuse and persecution as did Paul and other early Christians, but we do live in a post-Christian, increasingly secular culture, in which keeping the faith can be a greater and greater challenge. The messages with which our materialistic, consumer culture constantly bombards us can easily tempt us to drop out of the race of faith. Christianity? You don't really believe all that stuff, do you? Church? Why go to church when there are so many other fun things you could be doing with your Sunday? Sleeping in, reading the paper, having brunch, watching a ballgame, playing golf, going shopping. Prayer? Bible study? Who really has time for things like that when there are television shows to keep up with and new movies to see? Mission? Community service? Let's face it, most people find it easier to write a check than to rearrange their busy schedules in order to serve others themselves.

It can be very difficult to stay in the race, to keep the faith, if you're trying to do it all alone. But if you're part of a church, if you're part of a community of faith, you'll never run alone. There will always be other church members running with you who can give you support and encouragement along the way, and there will always be a great cloud of witnesses cheering you on.

I sometimes think of the race of faith as a never-ending relay race, in which each generation runs a leg of the race before passing the baton on to the next generation. And those who have gone before us (Dorothy Street, Hugo Hofstadler, Velma McConnell, Keith Johnson, Frank Iske, and so many others), are waiting for us at the finish line -- rooting for us, cheering us on. Keep going! Don't get discouraged! You can do it!

So, keep the faith! We're all in this together. And God stands by us always, giving us strength to endure all the trials and tribulations that life brings our way.

Maybe you're having difficulty with a relationship in your family or in your workplace. God will give you strength! Perhaps you're unemployed and facing the challenge of finding a new job. Have hope! Maybe you're living on the edge financially, just trying to hold things together. Keep the faith! Perhaps you're having health problems and you're facing an uncertain future. God will see you through. Maybe you have a difficult decision to make and you're looking for support and guidance. God is standing by your side.

Fight the good fight! Finish the race! Keep the faith! Don't get discouraged. Never give up! God is watching over you. God is watching over all of us -- every moment of every day. There is nothing that can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen!