

Staying on Course
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Psalm 84:1-7
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In a hospital for long-term recovery, there were two patients, roommates, who were both bed-ridden. One of the patients occupied the bed by the window, and was allowed to sit up for one hour each day as he received medical treatment; the other had to spend all day and night on his back, across the room by the entry door. They were separated by a partition, and could not see one another, but they developed a beautiful friendship. They spoke of their wives and families, their homes, their jobs, their involvement in the military service, and where they had been on vacation.

Every afternoon when the man in the bed by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window. The man in the other bed began to live for those one-hour periods where his world would be broadened and enlivened by the description of activity and color of the world outside.

“Today the park is full of children,” the patient by the window would say. “It is sunny and must be hot because some of the children are splashing about in the fountain. There is an older woman admiring the flowers in the gardens, and a young lad riding by on his bicycle, appearing to be whistling. The mail carrier is pulling up. Ah! A sweet black and white cat is sitting upon the stone wall and grooming herself. Sparrows fill the trees, flying about, almost appearing as dancing together as they move from tree to tree, frolicking in the air playfully.”

He recounted the strolling lovers under the cloudless sky, walking hand in hand and stopping to admire the reflection of the light on the fountain’s pool, sharing tender hugs and kisses. He relayed the changing of the colors of the flora and foliage as the seasons came and passed.

The patients grew very close as they shared memories of their own experience sparked by those outside the window. The man by the window suffered a new illness from which he was unable to recover and he died. The man by the door was deeply saddened at the loss of his companion – he greatly missed the camaraderie and now the days seemed endless.

He decided that if perhaps he moved to the bed by the window, he would at least have the goings-on of the outside world to lift his spirits. He asked the staff if it would be possible to move beds, and it was granted to him. He was moved to the bed by the window. Slowly, painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow to take a look at the world outside. He strained to turn to look out the window beside the bed. However, when he looked out, he saw only a bleary and bleak cement wall. He

was baffled, and asked the nurse when the wall had been installed, disappointed that his view of the park was now blocked.

“Oh, it’s been there since the hospital was built,” the nurse replied.

“I don’t understand,” the man declared, and he explained to the nurse the bucolic scenes his friend had daily detailed. “Sir,” the nurse said, “the patient who last occupied this bed was blind.”

The man lay in awe of the generous gift he had been given each day by his friend, who had chosen the path of serenity and light, to brighten his own life and that of others.

How do we choose to deal with our circumstances? What happens when we invite God in? What if we were to say, “God, show me the beauty in this moment, the hope and potential”?

In the 2nd Timothy New Testament reading, the final chapter of the Pastoral letter from Paul to Timothy, Paul (or a writer assuming Paul’s name), writes from a prison in Rome. As was noted a few weeks ago when we read the first chapter of the letter, Timothy, Paul’s protégé, is leading a church and is discouraged by the false teachers around him who are drawing the people away and leading them astray. Paul’s letter is one of encouragement to Timothy.

Paul reflects on his life, stating that although he has been abandoned by humans, he has been accompanied by God all along the way, and is thus never alone. He has fought the good fight, run the race, and kept the faith. He has stayed the course despite suffering and imprisonment, and he experiences God’s glory as he awaits the crown of justice as his life comes to an end. He has forgiven all those who betrayed and disappointed him, and this allows him to let go and be at peace. He has and will escape the lion’s mouth. He will not be devoured or destroyed because his spirit has been given the strength of God, which overcomes all.

It is at this point as if Paul is himself pure light and pure love. This he has learned from his relationship with Jesus Christ.

Like the patient at the window, Paul is able to envision and experience a glorious existence despite his physical circumstances, in the prison cell where he spends his final days. He has attained a peace and perspective through his steadfast faith. There is no more suffering. The reality is that of having overcome, of finishing the race, of fighting the fight. And though there is no talk of “winning” per se, there is the God-given strength developed through endurance, similar to a long-distance runner who trains and prepares. Paul has not drifted off-course. He has kept the goal, the finish line, in sight. Ultimate peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is the example of enduring betrayal and suffering and conquering even death through unwavering faith in God and God’s provisioning of strength.

Paul thus gives a message of hope to Timothy through the letter: Keep going, don't give up, God is with you, you can do it. I'm at the end of my life, and I have no regrets – I've given it my all and it's worth it. I see the crown of glory in sight.

There is a saying: Don't quit before the miracle – as message of hope to those new in recovery to encourage them through tough times that the struggle is worth it and the miracle is just ahead. Stay on course so you don't miss out.

Recently, one of our parishioners was injured and hospital-bound for a few weeks. She maintained an incredible sense of humor throughout the recovery process, and noticed the silver linings all around. She was touched by the cards and visitors and flowers that arrived in her recovery rooms. In particular, she mentioned a fellow church-member who wrote to her every day, letters describing day to day activities – nothing too spectacular – just the simple events of waiting for the bus, making dinner, meeting people along the way.

The letters, she said, were extraordinary because though they were so simple and perhaps even somewhat mundane, they provided a reality for her through which she could enter and join along. She said she felt that, when reading and rereading the letters, she was, too, waiting for the bus or checking the mailbox. There was an incredible depth of inner peace in reading these letters that she never would have imagined possible. The letters – 25 in all -- transformed her. They offered her a glimpse into the ordinary life she longed for and they gave her strength and endurance.

This is the same strength of God given to the letter writer of 2nd Timothy and the same strength of God given to the blind window-viewer, who then pass on this strength and hope through encouragement to others. This is discipleship in action: People who are staying the course, abiding through faith in God's strength, and passing it on. Strength to be continually passed on.

Paul says he offers himself as a drink, a libation to be poured out, as the patient by the window and our own letter-writer did. They are offering their very selves as a drink for thirsty people in their midst. This is what Christ did and what we are called to do. To pour ourselves out not in depletion, but with God's strength which is renewing and replenishing.

The Old Testament Psalm writer esteems the dwelling place of the Lord, longed for in soul and celebrated with joy in heart and flesh. The writer notices that even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for herself where she may lay her young. "Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise, O Lord of hosts, my king and my God. Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. They go from strength to strength."

Church, the psalm writer and letter writer of Paul are words of encouragement for us today, to stay on course and keep the faith. We are not to despair, no matter our circumstances, for God will prevail and our hope is in dwelling in the house of the Lord. We are not running in vain. We as a church are not alone or ever abandoned – God is with us. We as individuals are not running in vain – God is with us, guiding us, directing us, leading us to the Promised Land where there is no more crying and no more pain. It is coming, and it is already here in our midst.

When we reach out to others with encouragement, we are proclaiming the love of Christ Jesus our Lord whose mission is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We don't have to wait. We can have the peace of the living God right now by letting go of our own understanding, and surrendering to God's will, trusting in God's goodness and grace, allowing the strength of God to be our very own strength. This message is for us individually and corporally as a church.

Soon in the service, we will be offering our pledges for the new year together as the Redwoods Presbyterian Church – our 121st year! Let us do so with joy from where we have come and faith in our future that God will create with us. Let us stay on course, committing ourselves to doing God's work and trusting in God's provisioning as we serve together to establish God's peaceful kingdom on earth.

Amen.