

# **“Holding on in a Hurricane”**

September 27, 2020

Hamilton Presbyterian Church

The Prayer for Understanding:

The Witness of the Scripture:

The Epistle: Philippians 2:4-13

The Sermon:

It was last Thursday that I read a powerful sentence in my newspaper. My dad was the editor of a small California paper and later a sportswriter for the San Francisco Chronicle, so reading the paper is somehow in my DNA.

But I digress.

Here's what I read:

These last few years “have been marked by a barrage of events so overwhelming that each new day seems to scramble every day that preceded it.”<sup>1</sup>

“That’s it,” I thought to myself, “said so perfectly: it’s a freeway pile-up so intense, you can’t sort out the cars. It’s holding on for dear life in a hurricane. Barely can our minds contain the rushing events, opinions, prognostications, and the odd-ball opinions ... the totally crazy ideas that bombard us. Conspiracy theories about the Oregon fires have been discredited time and time again, and yet they persist. How we love a good conspiracy!

## II.

The background of today’s reading from the New Testament has the same flavor: the most tumultuous of times. . . when everything nailed down was coming loose.

While the exact date is in question, the crucifixion of Jesus occurred between AD 30 and 33. The air was thick with tough times, you could feel the heavy deadness in the air, revolt and revolution were brewing.

Do you remember? As retaliation for an ongoing Jewish revolt, in 70 AD, the Romans utterly destroyed the great Temple in Jerusalem and laid waste the city. This was only 40 years, two generations, after Jesus’ crucifixion, easily less than the lifetime of many here, Temple worship had disappeared.

The world was as well, a volcano rumbling. Nero, the fifth emperor of Rome, ruled at precisely this time, from 54 to 68 AD. It was a reign of tyranny, extravagance, debauchery, craziness, and just plain evil.

On July 18, AD 64, Rome erupted in the Great Fire. Think California, Oregon, think smoke and fumes, fire and ash. The city is reported to have burned for over a week. To shed the blame from his shoulders, Christians were an easy mark: “they starting the fire,” he said. The consequence? Arrest, brutal execution, “thrown to the beasts, crucifixions in the Coliseum as a spectator sport, burned alive.” Pretty ugly.

### III.

All this going on as Paul sat, languishing in a Roman prison. He knew only death would end his incarceration.

He writes to the church in Philippi.

Was he delusional that he could write these word as the hurricane plummeted the world? And yet, Rome is gone, and Paul is still with us, his words are coming to us as well.

Well, let me not put it off any longer. You can follow Paul on page 6 of your bulletin. Notice his two-sentence introduction, and then the indentation of verses 6-11. Scholars believe that here Paul is quoting a hymn.

Can you imagine? As the Philippi Christians are reading, the hymn is in their ear.

#### Philippians 2:4-13

<sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

<sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

<sup>6</sup> Who, although He was in the form of God,  
did not regard being equal with God  
as something to be exploited.

<sup>7</sup> He emptied himself  
taking on the form of a slave,  
and coming as in the likeness of a human.

And being found in human form

<sup>8</sup> He humbled himself  
becoming obedient unto death –  
even death on a cross.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God highly exalted Him  
and bestowed on Him the name  
that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup> So that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth, and under the earth.

<sup>11</sup> And every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord  
to the glory of God the Father.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore (that is to say: *because of this amazing gift*),  
my dear friends,  
just as you have always obeyed me not only in my presence,  
but much more now in my absence,  
Work out your salvation with fear and trembling,  
<sup>13</sup> because God is always at work in you,  
enabling you to both will and work for His good pleasure.

#### IV.

So I think to myself, what is it that allows such triumph in the face of disaster. From where does strength arise to write, energy to compose, tenacity to inscribe it on scraps of papyrus in his cell?

Paul says we are called to be imitators of Christ.

An imitator? Why not tell us to be Christ?

There is a great difference between an impersonator and imitator. Impersonators glory in trying to convince us they are who they are not. Some impersonation are great, some for comic value and entertainment. But at their core, we know they are really someone else.

On the other hand, there is a striving built into imitation, a striving to live up to the challenge of being a reflection of the person we look up to. We see persons in the church whom we consider spiritual giants and we wonder if we will ever be able to reflect the character they possess.

We look to those in public life that govern and lead with decency and honor, wisdom and intelligence, they become our models.

#### V.

So what does Paul mean when he says, “try to have the same mind, be a reflection of Christ?”

I don't think this is a call to perfection, but rather, an invitation to be honest with ourselves and understand that God is doing something unique and special in each and every one of us.

What if we were to walk through our life saying in a humble fashion: "God is doing something special with me. I need to discover and follow what that is."

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . ." The passage does not suggest past, nor future, but here and now, a growing in the right now.

This Christian living is a process. God's time line for each one of us is unique, and only God has the vision of the final product we will be. God is not finished with us yet.

Now isn't this funny? That's precisely what we sang earlier in our service:

Take, O take me as I am;  
Summon out what I will be;  
Set your seal upon my heart and live in me.

## VI.

And the power source behind all of this?

It's Jesus! The humble One who came to us in human form:

"He emptied himself  
Taking on the form of a slave,  
And coming in human form."

On the insert I've included a hymn by Caroline Maria Noel. It has this lovely verse:

"In your hearts enthrone him; there let him subdue  
All that is not holy, all that is not true.  
Look to him, your Savior, in temptations' hour;  
Let his will enfold you in its light and power."

## VII.

When times get difficult, when injustices batter us into submission, when a word of hope is needed, when holding on in the hurricane seems incredibly tough, no impersonation will suffice, no false front will help.

This process of growing as a Christian begins with a decision to become a reflection, a reflection of Christ in actions and reactions.

For sure, we will be imperfect reflections, sometimes bright, sometimes oh so dim. God is amazingly tolerant of this.

“Work out your salvation,” Paul says, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, because God is *always* (get that, “always”) at work in you, enabling you to both will and work for God’s good pleasure.”

Take, O take me as I am;  
Summon out what I will be;

1. Farhad Manjoo, New York Times, September 24, 2020.