

Rev. Luke C. Werre
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2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR ME;
WHAT GOD IS DOING FOR ME; WHAT GOD WILL DO FOR ME

Something I love about so many Christian hymns of the past is that they were not produced to earn an income nor merely to make you feel good. They are the living testimony of a fellow believer born out of suffering and still speaking to us today, to say, “Fellow believer, I have been there. I have been in that dark place. I can testify that God is faithful and true to every promise.”

Take, for example, the hymn we sang today, “I Walk in Danger All the Way.” It was composed by a Danish pastor, a Lutheran bishop in 1734, whose wife died giving birth to their 13th child. It is said after that he grew melancholy in spirit but that he continued to compose poems of rare beauty, his thoughts turning more and more toward heaven. He became especially known for his Christmas hymns. You may be familiar with, “Your Little Ones, Dear Lord, Are We.”

The Apostle Paul’s second letter to his protégé, a young pastor named Timothy, is like that – written as someone who has been there. The reading from God’s Word that we are contemplating today from 2 Timothy chapter 4 is like Paul’s own, self-written epitaph. Paul was in prison. He knew that this was likely the end for him. He would be executed by the Roman government because of his Christian preaching. Tradition has it, and accurately so, that Paul was beheaded because Paul was in fact a Roman citizen. When Roman citizens were sentenced to death in the court of law, they were executed by beheading because that was considered the quickest and most humane way to carry out an execution. The Romans had more perverse and creative ways of executing non-citizens, like crucifixion.

In the face of this the tone of Paul’s letter is nevertheless grateful resignation. Even so, Paul is still human. Paul is lonely. He pleads for Timothy to come to him quickly. Paul is cold. He asks Timothy to bring his cloak when he comes. Paul is hungry for the Word of God. He instructs Timothy to bring the Scriptures.

More than anything else, however, Paul wants to encourage Timothy. After Paul leaves this world, Timothy must carry on the Gospel ministry. Paul lays out a sort of triple approach for encouragement. It’s three things: What God has done for me; what God is doing for me; and what God will do for me. Contemplating these three things gave Paul peace and joy even in the face of his pending death. This would also sustain Timothy in his ongoing labors for the Kingdom. This is how the Holy Spirit will also encourage you and me when we struggle or are sad. He prompts us to remember: What God has done for me; what God is doing for me; what God will do for me.

Here in chapter 4 Paul writes, *I am already being poured out like a drink offering*. Paul is referring to a common part of Jewish worship that consisted of sacrificing a lamb or goat and burning it on an altar. Alongside that the worshiper would also pour out a carafe of wine as a drink offering to God. No doubt, in prison, knowing the end was near, it was like Paul could feel the life draining out of him. But if his life was being drained, it was a sacrifice for the Lord.

Paul goes on, *I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith* (meaning, I have guarded the true doctrine). *Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness*. We must ask, why is this in store for Paul? It's because of what God **has** done for him. God gave Paul the crown of righteousness at his baptism. When Paul was baptized by Ananias at his conversion, God washed Paul's sins away and covered Paul with Christ's righteousness. To the Galatians Paul wrote, *All of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ*. Christ has won the crown of glory for us by His righteous life, by His death and resurrection. Now Christ awards His righteousness to us in Baptism as a gift. Christ's righteousness wins an eternal crown of glory for us. This is what was set in store for Paul.

So, when Paul says, *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*, he's not speaking of self-improvement or of personal achievements like a 21st century American. Rather, Paul had fought a fight that had already been won by Christ. Paul competed in a race in which Christ was already the victor. Paul guarded a doctrine given by Christ that was already complete and perfect and could stand on its own. God had placed Paul in this arena. God had set him on this course, and now God's purposes for Paul were coming to a close. There is a deep satisfaction, a heart-felt gladness in Paul's words just to be made a participant in that winning game. All along Paul had served with confidence as someone who already owned and possessed the prize even as he began. All along Paul was encouraged by what God **had** done for him.

Next Paul pointed to what God **is** doing for him. Paul wrote, *At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth*. It's hard to imagine how lonely Paul must have felt. Standing trial in imperial courts it must have felt like the whole world was against him. But he trusted that God was with him and if God was with him, then God was governing all things according to His own good will and plan. Paul was where God wanted him to be and therefore God would not permit the world to devour Paul like a lion. Timothy should be encouraged that God is also with him as he carries out his work for the Lord.

Thirdly, Paul points out what God **will do** for me. Paul wrote, *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom*. Think of it. Knowing that his own execution was not far off he could speak in those terms: The Lord will *rescue* me from every evil attack and bring me *safely* to his heavenly Kingdom! The unbelieving world may go

into a mad hysteria when there is a Covid pandemic or over climate change, but we believers do not need to. Our God has promised us the resurrection to eternal life.

Paul's words remind me of something spoken by a retired, elderly pastor who used to serve here at Peace. His name was Pastor Laper. He entered full retirement at the age of 92. Anyway, the day was 9/11, 2001, the very day. The planes had hit the towers. The towers had collapsed. The whole nation was in shock. Pastor Laper was giving a devotion to a group of senior citizens who regularly got together for Bible study. I heard Pastor Laper say, "...so, if there were any believers in the twin towers when they fell, those believers are safe, safe with their Lord Jesus in heaven."

Dear Christian friends, this is the legacy that Paul wanted to leave for young Timothy. This is formula to sustain us throughout our earthly journey, these three things: What God has done for me; what he is doing for me; and what he will do for me.

Do you know where we have that beautifully summed up for us? The Apostles Creed. The Apostles Creed tells you what God has done for you, what God is doing for you and what God will do for you. This is why Martin Luther recommended reciting the Creed every day when you wake up. About a year ago when Pastor Arndt and I had a series on conducting home devotions we recommended saying the Creed often with your family at the table or at the door before you all leave in the morning. The Creed is pure Gospel. The Creed is all about your salvation. What a beautiful thing if someone would recite the Creed to you on your death bed. What God has done for you, what He is doing for you, what He will do for you.

Remembering those three things, may the Holy Spirit give you the same joy and satisfaction as the Apostle Paul throughout your earthly journey to the very last.