

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – June 6, 2021 – On Not Losing Hope Psalm 138 and 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Once, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, whom we'll call Greg, "shared the time he and his wife" - we'll call her Melanie - "visited the site of the former Nazi concentration camp near Dachau, Germany. After their visit, they re-boarded their tourist bus, and Greg started chatting about all they had seen. Animated, Greg went on and on. But all Melanie could finally say was 'Greg, I can't talk right now.'" Relaying the story several years later, Greg stated, "I had been to a museum, but my wife had stood in hell itself."¹

It is true, isn't it, that we each enter into pain, whether it be our own, or that of others, from a unique and particular perspective? And that we all respond differently to stress and anxiety? Some people have a more clinical approach to life. They will gladly speak with you about Covid-19 statistics, and current case counts, and prevention strategies. And that's okay. It's how they process information.

Yet, as we gather for the first time in Westminster's sanctuary following more than a year apart, many here today are still hurting. Amid the joy of reunion and the restoration of fellowship, some in our congregation continue to grieve the challenges

¹ James F. Kay, *Journal for Preachers, Pentecost 2021*, 27.

of the past year. For them, the heartaches are still too fresh. The separation is still too jarring. The losses are still too real and too deep. And as they seek to process the traumas of a pandemic, they may not be ready to open up with you about their own, Covid experience. And you know what? That's okay too.

In a recent article, Mark Ramsey offers sound advice delivered to a network of pastors and congregational leaders. He writes,

“This is a season to be very gentle with one another. If you are on the congregation's church board or council, I hope you strive for deeper places and larger goals in the months ahead, but please do it with grace and good spirit and consideration for others alongside you who aren't where you are and aren't moving at the same pace – whether faster or slower – that you are. Congregations need to be gentle and forbearing with one another. No sentence should be uttered that begins with ‘well, it's obvious that we should...’”²

Ramsey notes that in 2020, The Oxford English Dictionary named several words of the year,

“among them: *unprecedented, entangled, omnishambled, apocalyptic, and hellacious.*’ Well, nothing is ‘obvious’ in this unprecedented, entangled, omnishambled, apocalyptic, hellacious year! We are all looking for the light God will provide for our way forward. And we need all of us together to help find, nurture, share, and reflect that light.”³

² Mark Ramsey, *Journal for Preachers, Pentecost 2021*, 13.

³ Ramsey, 13.

Notably, “there is real pain that is driving us to want to ‘return.’”⁴ Yet, “for all the yearning of those who wish to return and recompose life as it was in church in 2019 (or 1979, or 1959...), the Bible’s direction is clear. When we ‘return,’ it is to God. We do not return to institutions or structures or ‘the way we do things.’ We return to the author of life.”⁵ Yes. We return to the God who “is always creating, redeeming, healing, and leading.”⁶

Or, as Paul describes it, “our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” Therefore, “we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

“Daddy, where is heaven?” The question falls sweetly from the lips of my youngest son. He is buckled into his car seat, and we are traveling in the minivan on the way home from preschool. At five years old, he senses that there is more to life than the tangible, earthly, human experience. He knows that his father is a minister,

⁴ Ramsey, 13.

⁵ Ramsey, 14.

⁶ Ramsey, 14.

and that I welcome questions about God. And he knows that I will be honest. So I speak with him about the spiritual realm and that which is eternal until he runs out of questions, and he changes the subject to sports cars, or his favorite animals, or fishing.

Over the past year, we've done a lot of that – Nathan and I - on rivers, and ponds, and lakes. We began with simple things like skipping rocks and looking for tad poles. And before we knew it, we had graduated to kayaks and fishing poles. Admittedly, I am a novice. The few times that I have been camping involved a cabin and bathhouse. I'm hardly Bear Grylls in Man Versus Wild.

And yet, I have just enough experience to believe that I can relate to what Paul is saying here when he claims that the work of pitching a tent is a temporary business. That it's something that we do for a time before returning to the shelter of a proper roof. Still, in a curious turn of phrase, Paul maintains that the entirety of the human experience is temporary. All of it. Even those things that we take for granted or always assumed would never end.

And Paul's claims remind us of the impermanence that dominates much of the human experience. Just consider the countless empires over the centuries reduced

to rubble. Or imagine the many cathedrals, built to stand the test of time, that have fallen into disrepair, teetered, and tumbled into ruins. Or ask if any earthly king has been spared a last breath. Friends, what stands forever are not the things of this world, but the promises of God. And it is this knowledge which keeps us humble, not only in faith but in every facet of our lives.

Each Monday afternoon, I lead a Bible study for all who would like to take part. And in the midst of those conversations, I am regularly blessed by the participation of Suzanne Winland. Suzanne, as many of you know, is a professional dancer and teacher by training who serves as the artistic director of the Infinite Legacy Project housed here at Westminster.

Reflecting on our first lesson this morning from Psalm 138, Suzanne drew inspiration from the following verses: “you increased my strength of soul... For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly.” And she pointedly explained that, in a world where egos abound, the most expressive dancers are also often the most humble. We could speculate on why this might be the case by diving into the world of psychology or individual personality profiles. But I have to imagine that this is likely the case – that the most expressive dancers are also often the most humble – at least in part, because their minds are fixed not on the pursuit of fortune or fame,

but on the love of their craft. And in the end, that is always enough – to be in love with one’s God-given purpose.

Today, we gather in the presence of one another for the first time in more than a year. We do so with a sense of joy for glad reunion, even as many of us are wrestling with the sure signs of prolonged trauma. Still, we rest in the knowledge that we can be made whole. In our own way. In our own time. At our own pace. So let us be patient with one another. And let us be kind. And let us never lose hope. In the name of God who creates, redeems, and sustains us. Amen.