

TELLING THE GOOD STORY

Sermon, October 16, 2022

Texts: Acts 26:1-18; II Timothy 3:14 - 4:5

Paul wrote this second epistle to Timothy, his young pastoral protégé whom Paul had left in charge of the Ephesian church; Paul had stayed in Ephesus some three years while on his third missionary journey. There are some scholars who question whether this epistle is authentically “Pauline”; however, there are many who don’t. Suffice it to say for now, I agree with those who don’t. Paul had hoped to return to Ephesus, but was now imprisoned in Rome for what would be his final incarceration, and he knows his end is near (*it is believed by most historians that he was executed under orders of Nero*). It is in this context he went on to write the verses just after the lectionary text we read earlier. Verses 6-7: *“The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”* II Timothy is his final letter. Paul has indeed fought the good fight, and he has kept the faith, which throughout his thirteen epistles he had encouraged all his readers to do. Throughout all the Pauline epistles, Paul calls Christians to persevere, to press on, to fight the good fight, to keep the faith.

And perseverance is a good thing, as long as one is persevering in the right direction. Perseverance is not a good thing, though, if one is persevering in the wrong direction (*as I learned in a very practical way driving to upstate New York last July to visit my son ... it was a rainy day as I took Rt. 146 North into MA, and entered Interstate 90/MassPike and thought I was making excellent time and good progress toward the NY border, until about one hour or so underway was dismayed to see a sign for Boston exits ... in the decreased visibility caused by the weather, I had entered the wrong entry ramp and was “preserving” in the exact opposite direction!*) Fighting is a good thing, as long as it’s the right fight. Fighting is not a good thing if we are fighting the wrong battles, and/or if we are fighting battles we should have no business fighting in the first place. And Paul is not encouraging his readers to keep believing if we have faith in wrong things. I’ve used this illustration before, but think of two ice skaters. One goes out on a half an inch of ice and confidently says, *“I know it will hold me up.”* The other goes out on four inches of ice and timidly says, *“Oh I don’t know, I’m afraid. I’m scared; I hope it’ll hold me up.”* One skater drowns, one skater lives. Who drowned? The one with a lot of faith! The one who lived was the one with little faith. Why? Because it is not the faith that saves you, it is the ice! It’s not the quality or quantity or even the sincerity of your faith that matters; what really matters is what your faith is IN.

The Pharisee Saul, before he became the apostle Paul, was so intent on being right that he thought nothing of imprisoning Christians (*and sending them, for the most part, to their deaths*) ... he was intensely religious, totally in line with what he perceived to be biblical authority, persevering in what he sincerely believed to be the right direction, zealous for his faith, intent on setting other misguided people straight by threats and force if necessary. However, he apparently had no compassion for those with whom he differed. AFTER his conversion, though, he was no longer murderous. AFTER his conversion, he never used the threat of power and/or coercion. AFTER his conversion, he always and consistently sought to persuade people in love and compassion. AFTER his conversion, he was hugely successful in reconciling with others, bringing life and joy and light into the life of others, and he arguably went on to become one of THE most civilizing human influences in the history of our planet! We never see the converted Paul using the threat of punishment, imprisonment, execution, intimidation, etc. that the Pharisee Saul so readily resorted to. Again, it matters what ... or Who ... your faith is in!

In Acts 26, Paul explains before King Agrippa¹ in Caesarea that this Christian movement he is now leading, he formerly tried to destroy ... because he sincerely thought that was the right thing to do, even the religious thing to do. But he was sincerely WRONG. Many good people suffered because of Paul’s well-meaning, but wrong-headed, perseverance in the wrong religious direction. He was persevering in what all his training and experience and conviction told him was the right thing to do ... until by grace, Jesus literally knocked him off his high horse on the road to Damascus and confronted Paul with the wrong-ness of his direction. Paul retells this story in the passage we read from Acts 26 and we can find the original account in Acts 9. As a dazed and blinded Paul is lying on the ground, he hears Jesus say, *“Now get up and stand on your feet.”* That’s important, by the way! I love this part. It is not the ministry of Jesus to just stop us; it’s not the ministry of Jesus to beat us down with guilt and leave us in the dust and dirt of our shame. Rather, it is the ministry of Jesus Christ to get us *back on our feet* and heading in the right direction, fighting the right fights, and persevering for things that matter.

¹ This is actually Agrippa II, the son of Agrippa I who had ordered the apostle James’ execution earlier in Acts. Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, who reigned at the time of Christ’s birth. For more detail, click [Who was King Agrippa in the Bible? \(compellingtruth.org\)](http://compellingtruth.org)

And for the next three decades Paul did just that. He persevered in this divinely given direction and mission. For the next thirty-plus years, he traveled throughout the Roman Empire, preaching, teaching, debating, proclaiming this faith and establishing churches. That's three decades of living on the pioneering edge of the Christian movement. Thirty years filled with success and some failure, thirty years filled with popularity and a lot of persecution, thirty years filled with joy and some grief. In thirty years Paul learned something of what it takes to hold on to faith when there seems to be every reason to give up to despair or disbelief, while others around him frequently did just that. In thirty years he learned something of what it takes to cling to his convictions while others were doing their best to pry his convictions away from him. In thirty years he learned something of what it takes to be a faithful soldier to the end, when others around him all too quickly had abandoned the battle or poured energy into fighting wrong battles. And in thirty years, he learned something of what it takes to establish and strengthen a church. It's in this context Paul writes to young Pastor Timothy and gives this admonition, *"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."*

"How from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures ..." Now, this coming Friday will mark the 38th anniversary of my ordination (*yikes!*), 26 of those years (*come December*) I have been here. One huge blessing of staying in one place for two and a half decades is having the privilege of seeing young people I have held in my arms at their baptisms continue to embrace their faith into adulthood (*our Director of Music for one!*). I've also had the related privilege of filling out reference/recommendation forms for students in our congregation over these years. Nine or ten of these references were for Christian universities and mission agencies which specifically asked me, as their pastor, to describe the applicant's understanding of, and commitment to, the Christian faith ... and having known these young men and women since they were tykes, I was able to write: *"so and so has a clear and compelling 'Timothy Testimony' to her/his faith in Christ, and is a young man/woman who consistently displays a sincere faith with integrity, devotion, high ethical standards, courtesy ... etc."*

A "Timothy Testimony" ... that's the testimony of someone who doesn't remember a time when they weren't a Christian, a testimony of someone who doesn't remember NOT hearing (*I know that's a double negative, but it works*) the faithful teaching of the Scriptures at home and at church. Now, I know we all love to hear the dramatic testimonies of those who have returned to the faith after a time away, or those who came to faith later in life having no faith upbringing. While it is good to celebrate with those who have a newly found or re-found faith, ideally, such testimonies should really be the exception rather than the rule among those raised in the church. Next week we will observe Christian Education Sunday, we'll commission our Sunday School teachers and youth leaders who so faithfully volunteer in ministry to tell the "old, old story" to those in their charge. It's as good a time as any to be reminded that our children, the children of the church, are to be raised like Timothy, who was taught the Scriptures from infancy and throughout his life continued in what he learned. This is how we in the church family WANT to raise our children, teaching them the Scriptures, telling them the *"... old, old story of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love"* (*this was from the hymn sung just previous to the sermon*) the **good** story we find throughout all the pages of Scripture.

Why is this old, old story so good? Why is the Bible so important? Because the Bible tells us God reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. Because God reveals His good plan for humanity in the Bible. Because God equips us for better service through the Scripture. For God tells us how to live life, and live it well, through the Scripture. As Paul writes, *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* Paul goes on to caution, *"Timothy, the time will come when people will not always listen to sound doctrine; instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."*

For Paul, the old, old story, the good story, is not a myth. The Christian faith taught throughout the pages of Holy Scripture makes the unique claim that God entered history by becoming human. For Paul, everything needs to be looked at in the light of that historical reality, that old, old story. In short, Paul's criteria for discerning truth: *"Is this consistent with what we know about God as revealed in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ?"* In other words, is this what Jesus would say is true? Is this what Jesus would say is good? Is this what Jesus would say is right? Is this what Jesus would do, and if not, why in the world am I contemplating doing it?!

That was the secret of Paul's persevering power. That is what it took for him to keep going when the going was tough. That is what it took for him to hold to his faith when others around him were giving in.

And that is what it took for him to cling to his faith and persevere ... to the very end.