

August 30, 2020 • 13th Sunday after Pentecost • Online Worship

“More Than Meets the Eye: Seeing Beyond Suffering”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—“I believed, and so I spoke” —we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, 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.

For 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.

Many years ago when I was serving as a campus minister, a student walked in one day with a gift. It was a beautiful magic wand. We'd been in conversation about many things happening in her life, on campus, in the country, some of which seemed insurmountable, and she thought a magic wand might help fix it all. I waved it frequently that year. Of course, it didn't really change anything, but it made us feel better. Nothing like a little laughter to lift our spirits and help us get through another day.

In these last months, or at various times in our lives, maybe we've had moments of wishing that God had a magic wand to wave, painlessly removing all obstacles, all sorrow, all suffering, all the things we can't seem to fix by our own efforts. Well, I hate to break it to you, but...speaking theologically now, one of the things the Apostle Paul is trying to teach us in this passage from 2 Corinthians is that God doesn't work by magic wand. God doesn't work by magically making suffering disappear.

That's the first take-away of this sermon: God does not work by magic wand.

Instead, Paul writes, God offers us power from within, inner strength, to persevere, to carry on, to make it through, to rise above.

In this second sermon in our series, “More Than Meets the Eye,” Paul confronts suffering head on. Not an easy topic. One we mere mortals have wrestled with through the ages. Our strength through it, he writes, comes from within us and from God above. Paul is trying to help us see that it's there even when we don't see it. His images of ‘making manifest,’ of ‘bringing to light,’ are all about what we might now call ‘transparency,’ helping us see through to truth. “We look not at what can be seen,” he writes, “but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

Paul is giving us new eyes or new eyeglasses or, we might say, a new spirit of faith to look unflinchingly at the hardest things and not resort to throwing up our hands in surrender or waving a magic wand. Though our bodies will get old and know suffering and illness, though the troubles of this world might seem intractable, our “inner nature is being renewed day by day,” Paul asserts. The power of God, he maintains, that raised Jesus from the dead, is poured into us even now. And so, Paul insists, “we do not lose heart.”

That's an awesome claim. Don't we all lose heart sometimes? Remember the power, Paul says, the power of God that will raise us also with Jesus. Remember that power within you, that gift from God, and stay steady. Stay clear. Keep your eyes on the prize, in Paul's imagery from another of his letters:...“press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

This spirit of stubborn faith, claimed at times in the face of all evidence to the contrary, has been called a spirit of defiance. Age, illness, suffering—I refuse to let this define my life or limit who God has created me to be. Powers and principalities—what are you in the face of the limitless, eternal power of God's love? Paul's call to claim God's resurrecting power within each of us gives us strength to define who we will be in the face of whatever life throws our way.

The other night, David and I were watching a hockey game, one of our Coronatide pastimes. The action on the ice is so fast and furious. And then the puck either goes into the net or it doesn't. After one particularly riotous scrum, the announcer observed wryly: “There's stuff you can control and stuff you can't. Either way, you just keep on going.”

You keep on going. I don't know how many hockey players might define it this way, but I can re-frame that in terms of faithful determination, stick-to-itiveness-ness, stubbornness, even, defiance of the odds, ignoring weakness and doubt, dogged tenacity, resilience, perseverance, yes—eyes on the prize. And for Christians, of course, that means, to put it in faith language, claiming the life-giving power of God that gives strength beyond what we can see, beyond what we can sometimes dare to hope.

One of my favorite Scripture verses, a clear testament to this kind of tenacious faith, comes, not from Paul but from the Book of Daniel. At that time, the Jews were horribly oppressed by the vicious tyrant Nebuchadnezzar and they were at the point of almost giving up hope that God would ever rescue them. They must have screamed out “why” a million times without ever getting a satisfactory answer from the silent heavens.

In the Book of Daniel, we read of three faithful Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Say these three great names with me—you want to have them as heroes in your spiritual backpack: *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego*. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego adamantly refuse to turn from God to worship the King's golden statue, even knowing that this would result in their being thrown into the fiery furnace. Boldly, they say to the tyrant's face: "If our God is able to deliver us, let him deliver us. But even if he does not, we will still not serve your gods, O King, and we will not worship the golden statue."

It's that "even if not" that is the key here. The three faithful men are proclaiming that they choose to remain faithful no matter what. They may well not understand what God does or does not do. Their prayers for rescue may or may not be answered in the way they would want. But they refuse to put God to the test, just like Jesus at the time of his temptation. They take responsibility for themselves, for their integrity, for their faithfulness and they say: whatever comes, we will remain faithful to our God.

This defiant faith in the face of all odds is the spirit of faith that Paul wants us to know and claim for ourselves and for our lives in this world. Faith in the face of suffering. More than meets the eye. Our faith is grounded in what we Christians proclaim as the resurrecting power of God, the power that rolled away the stone, defeated death in all its forms, and raised Jesus from the dead.

It is the faith John Donne speaks in his Sonnet 10. This 17th century British writer, poet, clergyman, served 10 years as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. During that decade, the Black Plague swept through the city three times. Donne's poignant, quietly defiant faith was grounded in Scripture, in words of Paul from 1 Corinthians: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

Donne wrote these familiar words in the sonnet we call "Death, be not proud:"

"Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

[From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?]

One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die."

This is the second take-away of this sermon: our faith is grounded in the resurrecting power of God, the power that rolled away the stone, the power that defeated death in all its forms, the power that raised Jesus from the dead. So much more than meets the eye! This is the power God pours into us, again and again, until our cup is overflowing.

So, let us not lose heart, claim this faith as our own, and cling to its promise through all that comes.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.

Notes:

Kyle E. Brooks. *More Than Meets the Eye* sermon series in *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series, Vol. 2*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019.

Insights into "defiance" from John K. Stendahl in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 2009.

"**Death, Be Not Proud,**" sonnet by John Donne, one of the 19 Holy Sonnets, published in 1633 in the first edition of *Songs and Sonnets*.