

Sermon: "I Have Run the Good Race"

Scripture: 2Timothy 4:6-8; 16-18

As for me, I am already being poured out as libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing...

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lions mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

The theological perspective of this passage in the Pastoral Epistles cannot be separated from the intense human struggle for life's meaning that is at its heart. Encountering this text is not unlike stumbling across the personal correspondence of a beloved relative, now deceased, written in an earlier time. This is tender, intimate material, infused with the drama of a trial, and deserves to be preached as such. In a time when instant communication is ubiquitous and every thought is quickly disseminated, one cannot but value the fervent faith, confidence, and hope that lie behind and within these well-crafted words.

The passage at hand concludes a charge to Timothy to be steadfast and faithful, even in the most difficult of circumstances, and its two parts surround the most personal of pleas. This is Paul in a moment of vulnerable humanity. Paul is sitting in a dank and dark Roman prison, awaiting the very probably violent end of his life. What is he thinking now?

CONCLUDING the RACE: Paul's words in verses 6-8 are often selected by families for use at funerals or memorial services for loved ones whose faithfulness has seemed exemplary. Stated in a Sunday morning service in ordinary time, these same words may afford an opportunity for the congregation to reflect on their own lives and, to think about their own mortality. Paul speaks directly here of his coming death, an uncomfortable topic for many, who put off any conversation about death with spouses, families, or friends, even though they long for words of assurance on the matter from the pulpit.

Many people do not know how to speak of death; they employ any number of euphemisms instead of saying the word "Die". Newspaper obituaries are particularly telling and display each day the countless ways people choose to say someone has died without actually saying that he or she has, well "Died". Some of the euphemisms are familiar: passed, passed away, passed on, went home to be with the Lord. Some are more creative: completed her mission, closed his eyes and went to be with God, was taken into the arms of the angels, woke up in the arms of Jesus.

In the second of his letters to Timothy, Paul employs not a euphemism, but a metaphor. He knows that his death is coming, and he will embrace it when it happens – confidently, hopefully, full of trust. He approaches that prospect in the firm belief that he has been faithful to his calling, and the metaphor he chooses to describe such faithfulness is that of a race.

This race has been for Paul not a sprint, but a marathon – indeed, more of a steeplechase, involving multiple hurdles and pitfalls and rigorous opposition. It is a race that will end in his death, which he describes as a form of a priestly libation or sacrifice. It is also a race in which he has put forth the greatest effort and in which he has done his unquestionable best, the reward for which will be a crown of righteousness.

On first hearing, Paul's testimony sounds like the declaration of a champion of the faith and may, to some hearers, seem to be much larger than their own experience. His concluding words v.8, "From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing..."

however, add an inclusive twist: not only those who have run vigorously and successfully will receive a crown; the victor's laurels belong also to all those "who have longed for Christ's appearing." Here is a not-

so-subtle reminder of the generous and gracious judgment of the One who bestows the crown, the One who waits for us when we finish our own race.

STANDING TRIAL. Paul is on trial, the underlying context for all that he says to Timothy in this chapter. His complaint, v.16, that no one stood with him in his first defense is not merely a statement of his own circumstance; it is also a reminder that we sometimes stand alone when we are given opportunity to testify to the truth of the gospel. Most Christians have considered at one time or another what kind of witness they would be in a time of trial, particularly if the stakes were high, wondered how faithful they would be to the Faith or how forceful and persuasive their testimony would be. Of course, such pondering misses a key point, which is that such trials occur every day, in countless venues. At one time or another, we are all called to testify.

Who knows when or where, for trials shift their settings from place to place; they appear in one moment in a dormitory room, the next in an office somewhere, then in a classroom or a store. They pop up in conversations around the family dinner table, in interactions with salesclerks and healthcare workers and teachers and counselors. The trials sometimes take the form of a casual conversation, or a debate about investments at a board meeting, or a question in a job interview, or a classroom quiz. The trial goes on, and we will be called as witnesses.

Despite Paul's grievances about being abandoned as he made his defense, he also displays an unwavering confidence in God's accompaniment and strength in his trial and in all circumstances. It is a remarkable juxtaposition – the language of complaint one breath, the prayer of gratitude and praise in the next. Then again, Paul's honest struggle to be faithful, his need for accompaniment and support, and his faith in God's provision are strivings and needs many Christians can themselves understand and even embrace.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY:

One dark night in a forest in Sicily, a robber held up at gunpoint a man who distributed Bibles. He was ordered to light a bonfire and burn his books. He lit the fire, and then he asked if he might read a little from each book before he dropped it into the flames. He read the twenty-third Psalm from one; the story of the good Samaritan from another; from another the Sermon on the Mount; from another 1 Corinthians 13. At the end of each reading, the robber said; "That's a good book; we won't burn that one; give it to me. In the end not a single book was burned; the robber left the bookseller and went off into the darkness with the books. Years later, that same robber showed up again. This time he was a Christian minister, and it was to the reading of those books that he attributed his change.

PRAYER:

Merciful God, in Jesus Christ we have your promise of peace. Receive those who seek your help. Assure us that you are near. Fill us with your spirit, cast out our anxiety and fear, and help us to rely on the strength you provide, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

BENEDICTION:

In the end, the gospel in Paul's words to Timothy lies in his assurance that, withstanding the trials of life, those who follow Christ are never ultimately alone, but rather are accompanied by One in whose presence they will find rescue and haven and hope.

GO IN PEACE!