



SERMONS

Behind the Mask: Getting Real We Do Not Lose Heart

2 Corinthians 4:1, 16

October 4, 2020

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I have some other COVID-related news that is way more positive: our in-person worship attendance just keeps growing! As people continue to return, they're discovering a safe environment (thanks for all you are doing to help with that!) and, equally important, they are rediscovering the power that comes from worshipping with other members of their church family.

This is wonderful news. And because of size restrictions, we need to add a third service. The new service times will be: 8:30 for classic; 10:00 and 11:30 for modern. This will begin October 18. I realize this is yet another change in a season of change and I'm sorry about that. But the good news is, whereas many churches are still not even meeting, we need to add a service to meet demand. I hope you will adopt your best Sweetheart Church attitude and agree that a 30-minute time shift is a small price to pay for the joy of worshipping together. And remember our #1 rule: No whining!

Take a look at this picture. Recognize it? Even if you aren't a hiker or climber, Half Dome is one of the most iconic peaks in the world. The face is a climb reserved for only the most advanced mountaineers, but you can also climb up the back of the dome using a set of cables that are set into the granite. I used to take youth groups on that climb. It was normally a three-day event. You hiked up from the valley floor, camped in Little Yosemite, climbed Half Dome the next day and returned on the third.

But a few intrepid souls make the 17-mile climb from valley floor to the top and back again in one day. It is something I'd always wanted to do. So, one summer with



several dear friends, we gave it a go. Turns out...you need to drink a LOT of water on a hike like that. And I didn't bring nearly enough. AND I didn't bring a filter. We made it to the top, but by the time we were half way back, I was spent. Dangerously spent. I nearly collapsed, I was so dehydrated. Other hikers shared water with me and I rested for a while before I began the last 4 miles. It was one of the few times in my life where I really, really, really didn't know if I was going to make it. I was so tired, so depleted, so thirsty. But what were my options? Just stay on the mountain? I had to keep going.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, he felt much the same way. Spent. He had gone through a time of terrible persecution and, even worse, rejection by the Corinthians. These folks to whom he had devoted two years of ministry had turned on him. Some claimed that Paul's suffering was proof he WASN'T a genuine apostle. Because real Christians...and especially real Christian leaders...never suffer or struggle. It was a first-century version of the modern prosperity Gospel. Part of the reason Paul wrote this letter was to counter that teaching and be restored in relationship with his Corinthian family.

Let me remind you of Paul's heartbreaking words to them in chapter 1: *For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.*

Paul didn't want to live! And he was taking a risk by being this transparent with his friends. We are in a series called "Behind the Mask: Getting Real." Paul is asking, what does it mean for us to take off our spiritual masks as Christians? To stop pretending. And one of the qualities that defines genuine Christian faith...is found in verse 1. Here it is: Even in times of crisis, pain, abandonment, despair...are you ready... "...we do not lose heart!"

How many of you watched the presidential debate? I watched about 15 minutes. It was all I could take. I was disgusted that the two major party candidates for the most powerful office in the world resorted to playground name-calling. And it wasn't the first time I've felt disheartened about the state of politics and discourse within our country. We don't just disagree with each other. We despise each other. And each

side is saying...and I'm sure believes...that if the other guy wins, our nation will never be the same. I'll admit that at times, I find myself falling into that, too.

I suppose that's possible, although I think we are pretty resilient country. But even if it IS true, does our future...does our hope... really depend upon who holds the White House? This nasty election seems like the perfect way to wrap up what has been in many ways a pretty nasty year. We've taken a lot of body blows...and it would be an understandable response to say, "I'm done. I've lost hope. I've lost heart."

And Paul would say, "Don't you dare! Christians do not do that. We do not lose heart." That phrase is actually a single Greek word that means, "We are not discouraged" or "We do not lose enthusiasm" or, more simply, "We do not give up."

Paul uses this phrase twice: verse 1...and then again in verse 16. "We do not lose heart...we do not lose heart." They are bookends to a section in which Paul describes the pain of his persecution and rejection. I was "afflicted in every way... perplexed ...persecuted...struck down." He felt trapped in his pain and did not see a way out.

The other day I was doing some yard work at a friend's house. He has one of those garage doors with folding segments but it does not have an automatic door opener...and it does not close easily. So...to get it closed...I reached up with my left hand to one of the top joints, hooked my fingers in...and gave it a pull. And you know what happened. That segment closed down, locking my fingers in as the door kept going down. I was stuck, in great pain and all alone. I managed to reach down with my other hand and pull the door back up until my fingers were released. I still have dents in my fingernails.

Paul admitted that he felt trapped in his suffering...and yet he said, not once, but twice, "We do not lose heart?" Let me ask you this: when would you say something like that? "We do not lose heart? We do not get discouraged. We do not give up?" When do you say such words? When things are going well? When you feel like you could go forever? When you are riding high and free and feeling great? NO! These are words you speak when you feel like you are trapped. When you ARE losing heart. When you ARE feeling discouraged. When you DO want to give up.

In other words, these words are often less a statement about what we actually feel and more an affirmation of what we WANT to feel. We speak life into death. We speak hope into despair. We speak victory into defeat. This is holy self-talk that boosts your own flagging spirits. As one dear friend told me this week, "You need to have a sales meeting with yourself every morning." When you are down, you need to declare, over and over again, "I DO NOT LOSE HEART! I DO NOT GIVE UP!"

And before you accuse me of positive-thinking mumbo jumbo, I will remind you that King David taught us how to do this. In many of his psalms, he would confess to the Lord how frightened he was, how abandoned he felt, how hopeless it seemed...and then, he would almost always END with an affirmation of hope in the Lord. He would give himself a good talking to...a sales pitch to himself. Like Psalm 42:5: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation..."

Thursday was a rough day for me. The details don't matter. But in a season when I feel like I'm managing from crisis to crisis, I found myself facing another crisis. It felt like one more gut punch. I sent Cyndi a text saying, "You won't believe it..." ...and then went into another meeting. She called immediately. And I sent a text saying, "I can't talk right now." And SHE sent a text that said, "You can't send me a text like that and then tell me you can't talk to me!" She was right; that was mean. Anyhow, I later shared my frustration with her. There are times in life when you just want to throw your hands up and walk away, right? But then...I was reminded of the very words that I would be preaching to you: "...we do not lose heart." "We do not give up."

Our LifeGroup was talking about this passage and one of the men said, "You know, our family had a motto. Actually, it was my mom's motto...but it became everyone's motto. 'Isbells never quit.' Every time we faced a challenge, mom would say the same three words: 'Isbells never quit. We just keep going.'" "How do you eat an elephant?" she would ask? "One bite at a time. Isbells never quit."

Neither do Christians. Not because we are so tough...but because the Spirit of Jesus lives within us. When we listen to that soft, persistent internal voice...and ignore the harsh clamor of the world...we hear him reminding us, "Do not give up. Do not lose heart. I am with you. Do not be afraid of the world. I have overcome the world. I am



greater than the ruler of this world...and you are mine. I will never leave you or forsake you. So do...not...lose... heart.”

What should be most encouraging to us is this: we have a savior who understands the temptation to give up. To run away. To lose heart. When Jesus knelt in Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal...knowing the horrors that awaited him in the coming hours... he cried out to his Father, “Take this cup away from me! It is bitter! I don’t want to drink it!” But he did. He drank it to the dregs. He did not lose heart. He did not give up. And his victory...on the cross...and out of the tomb...makes it possible for these words to be more than rah-rah positive thinking. These words have Holy Spirit power. And we need to remember them...and repeat them...as a proclamation of faith...every time we are tempted to give up. **WE...DO...NOT...LOSE...HEART.**