

“Grace, Strength and Courage” 2015
Joshua 1:1-2, 5-9 Mark 13:1-8

Years ago, when my two oldest granddaughters were still toddlers my son-in-law came upstairs into my office to speak with me.

At his church, the pastor was focusing on Revelation and end times, and having recently read the book, “Left Behind”, Mike was convinced that the second coming was imminent and that the world was going to be ending pretty soon. **He wanted to talk to me about what he should be doing to be ready.**

Of course as a pastor I was thrilled and delighted that he was taking his faith serious...but as a grandfather I was somewhat horrified when he talked about quitting his job so he could study the Bible to focus on preparing for the end...Since, as he explained it, if you read the Bible and follow current events, then obviously the apocalypse is drawing near.

But instead of screaming what I was actually thinking, I handed him a Bible and asked him to read Mark 13 out loud.

I explained that when Jesus had spoken those words, he knew he was going to be crucified in a couple of days, and that for the disciples and his followers, it would feel like their whole world had just ended. Jesus wanted them to hang in there with strength and courage by knowing and trusting that despite terrifying and threatening appearances, God was in charge and fulfilling his wonderful purpose.

And decades later when this Gospel of Mark was being written, the Roman army had just crushed the bitter Jewish revolt with the slaughter and total destruction of Jerusalem. The fire that destroyed the Temple had burned for three days.

Mark was writing to a faith community struggling to make sense of the shock they felt over the destruction of Jerusalem, and false prophets saying that it was the end of the world.

The author was reminding them of what Jesus had said, vs. 4,6, 32-33

Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray... but the end is still to come. ... about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

I said to my son-in-law, that teaching from Jesus is still true... **calling us not to worry or panic into doing something stupid, but in faith, to live usefully-faithfully and trust in God.**

I explained that his task in life was to be ready always, and that to be ready meant loving and supporting his wife, and raising his children in a loving Christian home within the nurture and admonition of the Lord...**so that whatever happens in this world, they are well-equipped with an authentic and hopeful faith, to live out God's gracious love with courage and strength.**

There will always be struggle, confusion and tribulation, and we may feel afraid, anxious, discouraged or disappointed, **but don't assume that means it's the end of the world.**

We hope because through it all, we can trust that God is with us, and that by design and plan, God is still accomplishing His gracious **saving purpose.**

Whatever our situation or circumstance, God's love sustains us, so our call is to live in trust, and faithfully serve well along whatever journey God has laid out before us.

In the Joshua text we read, imagine Joshua's doubt and trepidation anticipating the tasks and journey God has laid out before him ... **Joshua was supposed to follow in the footsteps of Moses.**

Moses, he was the guy who spoke directly to God, or from a burning bush, or fire and lightning atop Mt. Sinai, and who somehow got mighty Pharaoh to let the people go... **and so now it falls to Joshua, and where Moses came up short, to lead the people and to conquer the Promised Land.**

In the Joshua passage, the task is laid out in two stages.

First, realistically assess the situation. Joshua 1:1-2, 5-6

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. ...

... As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous.

Moses is gone, so get going on the task that God has given you.

And here's the promises that goes with the job --- I'll be right there with you, I've called and equipped you to do it well, and moreover, I will do the heavy lifting.

***** That is God's desire and intention for how his servants should see and perceive our tasks and the journey ahead.**

The second part: do not waver but be strong and courageous. Joshua 1: 7, 9

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do ... I hereby command you: **Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed**, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Those instructions remind me of one of my favorite movie scenes. In "The Dead Poets Society", Robin Williams plays an English teacher at an exclusive boys school, who takes his class to the school's trophy case; and pointing to pictures of the school's past athletic teams he says to these young boys:

"Carpe diem – seize the day."

** [We can do that because God promised, I am with you wherever you go.]

In the movie, Williams tells the boys: **Carpe diem – seize the day.**

Seize each day and cherish it dearly because you experience only a limited number of springs, summers and falls. One day, as hard as it is to believe, each and every one of us is going to stop breathing, turn cold and die.

Then pointing to an old and faded team photograph, he continues:

Stand up and look carefully at the faces of these boys who attended this school sixty or seventy years ago. They're not that different than any of you, are they? They believed themselves destined for wonderful things, just like many of you. Where are those smiles now? What of their hopes and aspirations? In chasing the almighty deity of success did they not squander their boyhood dreams?

Many of those gentlemen are fertilizing daffodils. However, if you lean close, you can hear them whisper --- carpe diem, lads.

Seize the day; and make your life extraordinary.”

“Make your life extraordinary.” I really like that. **We are, all of us, the blessed and beloved children of God. The amazing grace of God makes us who we truly are, and assures us of a wonderful and secure future ... but is that really the way we live, lives defined by God’s grace?**

Do we have joy and passion for this life we are living? And what is it about today that will be worth having gotten out of bed this morning? **Do I gratefully embrace each day as a sign of God’s grace?, for the amazingly wonderful gift that life truly is, and try to squeeze from it all the joy and delight I can?**

For Christians, our lives are classrooms for spiritual growth where the tasks, the events and circumstances of life can help teach and train, preparing us for eternal life by allowing God to work His grace and purpose in us.

Please do an experiment with me, hold up your hand and breathe on it. Does your breath feel warm and moist?

Then God isn’t done with you yet.

All of us, we still have more life to live, and blessings from God even amid our worst struggles...and let me illustrate that by focusing on retirement.

In early America, older folks were highly esteemed and valued; for their insight, guidance, understanding and life experience especially for all they knew about farming and growing things. They had lived through years of weather, soil and crop conditions and they knew what worked and what had not worked in the past – their 'lived knowledge' was invaluable in raising crops.

But then as factories and manufacturing jobs replaced agriculture during the industrial revolution, older factory workers could not keep pace with the younger and so were less usefully functional and so devalued.

Then after WW II, land developers and corporations began to market 'retirement' as a life of leisure and rest, in communities segregated by age to fill the years with fun, as the appropriate reward for a lifetime of hard work...**with no expectation of trying to make a meaningful contribution.**

And that attitude has been deadly, a tragic and wasteful mistake, because idleness and self-absorption and disengagement do not lead to satisfaction, contentment or happiness - indeed its effect has been quite the opposite.

As it turns out, an inactive, self-indulgent, disconnected and idle retirement is destructive to health and diminishes mental capability for idle isolation is deadly & makes life meaningless.

We humans have an innate need to be busy, to feel useful and needed, and fulfilling that, is critical to contentment and longevity. In addition, it’s a waste of God given talents, gifts and resources that were intended for us to use to serve and to help other people.

Beyond the difficulties and limitations of age and aging, and though we can't do everything we once did, that in no way means that we cannot serve in some way, or that we can't do things that are useful & meaningful. For those willing to serve and give, the opportunities abound that don't require great health & vigor; just willingness and time.

e.g. Anyone can write notes, make phone calls or visit shut-ins to relieve their loneliness and isolation and offer healing support, encouragement and hope.

In football teams are given a two minute warning in the final quarter and they have pre-arranged strategy and run special plays to make the best use and score in the remaining time.

In basketball, some of the best plays, fast breaks and most exciting action will occur in the final minutes or even seconds of the game. Some teams just run out the clock and coast, but other teams make the most of whatever time they have.

Retired?

How will you use your final years well, usefully and faithfully? Where will you derive meaning, contentment and purpose? What will be your reason for getting up in the morning?

Surely life is too precious to be wasted or rendered insignificant, for if we're not giving, then we're not really living... and surely we can do better than just run out the clock... surely God's grace makes more of difference in my life than that.

* **Faithful retirement, and life for even the youngest among us**, is not about just idly passing the time in complacency, or resting in God's waiting room until our ticket home.

We can trust our loving God to bring us home at the appropriate time, but until then, there is a purpose for our lives to continue, something wonderful and meaningful that God has for us, something we are uniquely qualified and able to do... and for all of us child, youth, grownup or weathered senior, we all can make an impact that can last far into the future as a blessing in the lives of those we touch with God's love.

Our call today, is to consider our life and mission with Jesus, and what are the obstacles that are holding us back from a more joyful, useful and meaningful life?, or that detract from a more authentic walk with God, or the joyful life and blessings God intends for us?

To that end, I urge you to connect or reconnect by participating, by finding ways that you can share in the mission of the Lord, and let God's grace and Holy Spirit transform our lives.

By grace, God will provide all the strength and courage we need, so please, don't sit on the sidelines, when God is calling you, and if you need a personal invitation --- then consider yourself invited, and if you need to be asked, then listen, I'm asking you.

As Paul wrote in Philippians 3:12-14,

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, **because Christ Jesus has made me his own**. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.