

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Perseverance"
Dr. J. Dent

November 4, 2007

Some days begin like a hurricane, or maybe a tropical storm. Yesterday, I got a call from one my colleagues in ministry, telling me that someone had died at the hospital, and asked me to go there to meet with the family. A few minutes later, the Board chair called from the church to tell me we had been broken into again. I visited in the hospital, came to the church and found that my office had been invaded and Judy's too and Scott's office lost equipment and resources.

There are times in our lives when we wonder, "What else can go wrong today?" What other challenges will I face today? When I got home at lunch time, another call came in regarding a person who had passed away with a connection to St. Andrew's, and since David is away, I was able to minister to that person.

But there are days and times when the stress seems to get to the breaking point, when it all seems too much. How do we handle our stress? On the negative side, I often become impatient with the ones I love, which does not endear me to them nor to myself. On the positive side, I turn to God.

The tough times are the times to turn to the Lord. That's why Paul so encouraged the Thessalonians that when they were under stress their trust and faith in God came to the fore, their steadfastness, that is, the evenness of their commitment to Jesus Christ became more evident, not less. How they handled their times of stress showed how real Jesus was in their lives and how genuine their trust in God and their servant hearts were manifested. I want to be more like that so that God is praised when I am under stress, rather than simply negatively drawing attention to myself.

Another person who acted well under the challenges and stresses of life was Zacchaeus. He desperately wanted to meet with the Lord but he was unable to do so. We might say today that he was "vertically challenged." He couldn't see over the crowd. But instead of giving up on the Lord, he decided to creatively address the challenge and climb a tree.

I hope each of us when we come to church seek to meet with Jesus. You will find many challenges both inside the church and outside it, many obstacles to seeing and meeting with Jesus. But if you come with the expectation that you will indeed meet with God, hear Jesus Christ speaking to you, then you will indeed have an extraordinary experience here, or anywhere you go with that desire deep in your heart. Whatever the challenge, whether it be a person or a situation or a need or anxiety, don't let that stand in the way of your meeting with Christ. Find the higher ground. Find the creative solution.

And just like Zacchaeus was extraordinarily met by the Lord, you will have an experience of Him as well. Jesus knew what was on Zacchaeus' mind that day. It would be safe to say that he knew the obstacles that Z (I'll give him an American nickname, if I may) had to face. He knows our obstacles. He knows our hearts.

Now in his earthly ministry I don't believe that Jesus simply went into divine overdrive to know these things. He was the prophet, priest and king par excellence. He laid aside his divine nature, "making himself nothing" (Philippians 2:7) and became a servant. And so as a human being that we can relate to, He exercised his prophetic spiritual gift and gave Z the desire of his heart, not only to meet the Lord, but also to spend some time with him in his home.

God knows our hearts and wants to spend some time with us in our homes, should we quiet our lives enough to know that He indeed wants to do this. But it takes time and effort. Someone once said we often don't hear God because we do not want to stoop down low enough hear him. Sometimes we are given challenging circumstances to indeed be low enough to hear God.

In Z's home, we find that not only has he encountered the Lord, but has had the privilege of listening to his teaching. And as a result of his teaching, he confesses the sin of cheating others and offers restitution for that sin. Jesus declares that salvation has come to his house. Z's actions showed that his faith in Christ was not merely intellectual, it was a practical change of heart, a real repentance.

We too are challenged to show the reality of our faith in God. We too are challenged to give away to the glory of God. We too are challenged to make restitution where we harmed others. Is there someone in your life or mine

that we need to ask forgiveness and offer restitution, particularly if there has been some theft or lie involved? Time does not heal our wounds. But the Lord heals us where we offer every part of our lives to Him.

I've called today's sermon "perseverance," because a lot of what we face day to day is simply continuing on in trusting God. God does meet us in the extraordinary times, but mostly we need to set time aside to meet with Him during the ordinary times.

One of the Reformed doctrines that holds us in the hands of God is called the "perseverance of the saints." It is the notion that God holds us more than we hold God. And in the end, it is God's faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ that gives us admission to heaven, not how good or bad we have been. Now we still are responsible to receive and accept this message, but nevertheless God holds us more than we hold God.

One of the minor prophets struggled with why the bad are not punished right away and why the good don't get a better life right away. That's in part the message of Habakkuk, part of which we read today. He wanted to take God to court to have his say and have a clear answer for why the unjust and the wicked get away with so much, and why the righteous weren't better off. In the end, he trusts God who knows better than he does all the activities of all the nations of the world, and every individual. The book ends with:

3:17

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,

3:18

yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

3:19

The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

Even through the hardest times God stays with us. Yet it can feel as if we have been abandoned. But we have not been abandoned. We don't have any of the answers to all the deepest questions of "why?" in this life, but we can depend on the One who holds us and cares for us.

So often in the short term, when someone goes through some painful or difficult struggle, all we can do is listen and care for the person going through it. I dare not offer an explanation or a commentary, but simply care

for that person. So too we need the arms of God around us in every perplexing time, as well as in the ordinary times.

We continue on, we persevere. Romans 5 talks to me so often:

5:3

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

5:4

perseverance, character; and character, hope.

5:5

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Perseverance takes place in between our sufferings and our character development. Paul doesn't say that we rejoice because of our sufferings, but rather in the midst of them because of the One we know. So much in life comes back to this primary relationship.

That's why I put so much emphasis on that relationship here from this pulpit. That relationship should form our politics, our economics, our understanding of history, our theologies, our philosophies, our agendas, our employment practices, our friendships, our interactions, our social action, the whole of our lives. Just as mother and father have formed us in ways which are undeniable, so too is our relationship to our God ultimately formative to who we are and to whom we are becoming.

Whatever you face today, I urge you to lay it at the feet of the One who knows you deeply and wonderfully.

Let us pray.