

**“Press On Regardless”**  
**Text: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; II Timothy 2:1-13**  
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*Key Verse: ...if we endure, we will also reign with him...II Timothy 2:12a*

The letter that goes by the name of Second Timothy is full of advice from an older man of faith, Paul, or a disciple who writes in Paul's name, to a young colleague named Timothy, who is in Ephesus in Asia Minor. Ephesus is located in what is now modern Turkey. This is the most pastoral of all the epistles that scholars call the Pastoral Letters. It is a passing along of learned wisdom from a missionary who has been around more than a few blocks. He shares what he has learned about serving God wisely and for the long haul with the young man named Timothy.

Though the letter is not dated, we know the season of the year. It was written in the fall. Think of it as an October letter. In the closing sentences, Paul urges Timothy to “do your best to come before winter.” A voyage from Ephesus across the Adriatic Sea, between November and March, would have been impossible because of winter weather.

It has been suggested that the letter is an autumn letter in another sense. (1) Paul is clearly at the end of the autumn of his own life and ministry. He is remarkably at peace with that reality, writing: “As for me, I am being poured out as a libation, and the time for 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.” This letter is his “farewell address,” a summation of the learnings of a lifetime.

I read recently that there is a new tradition, if there is such a thing, emerging in colleges and universities. Professors are being asked to give what is called their last lecture, even though they are tenured and plan on being around for awhile. They are being asked, “What would be your final talk, a hypothetical talk you would give if you knew it was the last lecture you would ever give?” One such speech was delivered by a professor at Carnegie Mellon University. This talk by a computer science professor named Randy Pausch has become one of the most watched speeches ever to have been on the web. What is so compelling about Dr. Pausch's situation is that he literally has delivered his last lecture. At 46, he has out-of-control pancreatic cancer and is expected to live only few months. He is a true “tech” guy, so his lecture was multi-media. There were photos of him as a boy, images of his CAT scans, videos of him playing with his

three children aged 5, 2 and 1. In the lecture, Professor Pausch spoke about the many set-backs he has experienced in his vocational life but, he said, he “has learned that brick walls are there for a reason. They let us find out how badly we want things.” He encourages his hearers “to be patient with others; wait long enough and people will surprise and impress you.” He makes it clear that helping others to fulfill their dreams is “even more fun than achieving your own.” He’s not maudlin in any way. He says that after he received his Ph.D., his mother introduced him by saying, “This is my son. He’s a doctor, though not the kind that helps anybody.” People laughed and people cried. But mostly they were inspired by the courage and the endurance of the man who stood before them.

What wisdom would you want to impart? You, if you knew it would be your last chance to say what you have learned and what you know for sure?

While you are pondering, I want you to look with me at the wisdom that Paul offered to Timothy in his autumn letter of long ago. “You then, my child, be strong in that grace that was in Jesus Christ.” In other words, I am advising you to rely on God, whom we know to be grace through Jesus Christ. Remember that you do not have to reinvent yourself everyday, or rely on your own strengths, because actually you do not have it within yourself to face every situation. You after all are only human, which means you inherently have limits. Some things, indeed, many things in life will require more than you have. So, be strong, not only in yourself, but in the grace of God, which is unconditional and eternal and sufficient to cover anything that has to be endured. “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me,” Paul wrote to the Philippians while he was in prison, in chains. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” To the Corinthians he wrote, “I prayed three times to the Lord to remove the thorn from my flesh, but the Lord said to me ‘My grace will be sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in your weakness.’”

The words of Martin Luther’s great hymn come to mind, “Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing. Were not the right man on our side, the man of God’s own choosing.”

“Be strong in the grace that is in Jesus Christ,” Paul wrote. Then he went on to say, “Whatever you have heard through me from many witnesses, it is your turn to pass along what you have received to other people, who will be able to teach others themselves.” In other words, you have received the good news that leads to life, and now you must share that good news, because you know it to be sound teaching. Unsound teaching is an issue today. It was an issue in the church in Ephesus. (People will say just about anything and claim that it is what the Bible says: The prosperity gospel, the feel-good gospel, the God-exists-to-make-me-happy gospel – I could go on – but that’s the subject for another day...) The message that Paul wanted to get through to Timothy was that he should trust in the strength that came from Christ and remember that he had already

been given good information about eternal things and had a responsibility to be a good steward of the promise of redemption.

Next came the teaching that was at the core of what Paul had learned and wanted to share with Timothy, whose race was as yet before him. "Share in suffering, like a good soldier of Jesus Christ." Paul was himself in chains. To follow Christ in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was to risk being arrested, chained, persecuted, even executed. You and I do not know that kind of suffering or that kind of danger, but we know suffering in our bodies, in the painful crises of our family lives, in the sufferings of a world, which is full of suffering. Whenever we share in those things, ours or the sufferings of others, we realize that we have stepped into a realm in which we find God wholly and fully present. In Christ, God unconditionally and completely identified with the human condition. When we have daunting things to deal with, to face, confront, and fight against, we have entered God's realm, even as in Christ, God entered the human realm. (2)

I had the occasion last week to speak with a minister friend in Minnesota. I called him on Monday; he called me back on Tuesday, apologizing for the delay. "Sorry Joanna, I had a funeral yesterday. An elder in our church took his own life. Actually today, I am on my way to another memorial service."

"Good grief," I said. "It sounds rough."

He said, "Well, so it is. But as I have been telling everyone all week, this is what we do here. We walk together, through the valley of the shadow, in the light of the resurrection."

That is what the church is all about – sharing in suffering, like good soldiers of Christ. The New Testament is full of these military metaphors. (3) They are effective in expressing the rigor of the commitment required. Paul has learned that it is not the easy road to follow Christ, but it is the most meaningful path one could ever take. He refers to the strict discipline of the athlete, which allows the athlete to endure the heat and strain of competition. He refers to the persistence of the farmer who cannot wish a crop up out of the ground. You have to till the soil and plant the seed, weed and water, and wait out the risks of weather. Sometimes, all is lost, but you plant your crop again. Sometimes it doesn't rain for 15 months, but you wait and endure. These word-pictures of the soldier, the athlete, the persistent farmer, all fall under the rubric of the word "endurance," an underrated and seldom discussed Christian virtue, but one that is essential to life over the long haul, and to life in the face of an immediate crisis that threatens to do you in. (4)

Endurance. I never thought of endurance, when I was in my 20's. Life was all about the here and now and what came next. I figured if I didn't like something, I could just move on, shake the dust off my sandals. Staying power was not something I ever consciously prayed for, but I have learned that I would have

been an utter failure as a human being, as a wife, as a mother, as a minister, or as a friend, if God had not given me the spiritual gift of endurance.

Think about parenting. Children are cute and darling, especially my grandchildren. But they are not cute and darling all the time. They throw up, for one thing. They take a long time to grow up. When they're little, you can't get them to sleep. When they're teenagers, you can't get them out of bed. Parenting calls for endurance. So does marriage. Marriages have their ups and downs. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out why the marriage vows include the words for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Endurance is not an option. It is essential for a lasting relationship.

Certainly, endurance is called for in the Christian ministry. When you are tired and weary and have done all you think you can do, there is still more to do and so you soldier on. Sometimes you suffer for speaking the truth. I've always stood on the side of inclusion, and I've been told there have been search committees of churches who said, "We would have talked to Joanna, but we know what she stands for." Imagine thinking that the Christian gospel is about excluding anybody!

Sometimes you suffer because you speak for the truth. Sometimes, your heart breaks clean in two because people that you love in your congregation undergo great pain and deep loss. You have to soldier on. The grace of God does not exempt anyone from trouble. The grace of God is what enables you to handle trouble - the big kinds that won't go away and the thousands of little messes that occupy your time and energy over the course of a lifetime.

I picked up one of my favorite books off my shelf this week, a book written by Hamilton Jordan, who was White House Chief-of-Staff during the Carter administration. In the book, Jordan tells of his life in politics, and also about his several successive bouts with cancer. He describes the medicines and the mouth sores, the x-rays, the medical chores that take up so much time, the despair that can set in. But he also writes of how despair never got the upper hand. "After my first cancer, even the smallest joys in life took on special meaning: watching a beautiful sunset, receiving a hug from my child, a laugh with my wife Dorothy. That feeling hasn't diminished with time. After my second bout and my third, the simple joys are everywhere and boundless. I cherish life; I do not take it for granted."

"Or, as a friend who is bravely battling a brain tumor reminds me, 'There is no such thing as a bad day.'" Now that's endurance at its finest. (5)

Paul in chains: Is he grim and joyless? Don't you sense the optimism of his words in his farewell letter? It's anything but dark and stark. What he writes is grounded in the glad confidence that he and we can do whatever has to be done, because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Remember Christ, raised

from the dead. Therein lies “your strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”

In her book entitled *A Country Year*, writer Sue Hubbell tells about her 300 beehives scattered across the hills of southern Missouri in the pastures of farmers. “In the spring, I spend most of my time driving out where the hives are, taking care of the bees, getting them ready for the major nectar flow which they will make their crop. I use a big truck to haul the honey to market. But for the daily work I drive a courageous little vehicle, a 1954 red Chevy half-ton pick-up. I’ve given it a name. I call it Press on Regardless, because it runs zestfully without most of the parts considered to be automotive necessities. Over rough spots, through mud, and hard times, we press on regardless.” (6) And why shouldn’t they, and why shouldn’t we press on through the rough spots and hard times? Remember Christ, raised from the dead and the promise that “if we endure, we shall also reign with him” who endured the cross and sits now on the right hand of God. To God be the glory. Amen.

(1) Mark E. Urs, “The Easter Faith for Autumn Days,” *Lectionary Homiletics*, October/November, 2007 p.17.

(2) Robert K. Gnuse, in the Journal above, p. 13.

(3) Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, Interpretation, John Knox Press, 1989.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Hamilton Jordan, *No Such Thing as a Bad Day*, Longstreet Press, 2000, p.216.

(6) Sue Hubbell, *A Country Year*, Harper & Row, 1986, p.19.