

Faithful Perseverance
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FPC Spartanburg, Chapel & Sanctuary Services
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Psalm 30

Hear the Word of God:

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity, “I shall never be moved. “By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed.

To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: “What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!”

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

*The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.***

Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God, as we listen to your Word for us today, may your Spirit rest upon us. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living, Amen.

Sermon

I should begin by confessing that I had a hard time coming up with a title for this sermon. Psalm 30 is the lectionary passage for today that I felt called to preach on, but coming up with a concise title was difficult because there is so much good material packed into this one psalm. It's a story of suffering, redemption, reconciliation and rebirth. Usually, I like to find a word in the text to pull into or play off of for the title. I thought about the words used repeatedly in this psalm, like praise, joy, favor, and thanksgiving, which all are important, but none of which seem to tell the whole story. One of the reasons I love this psalm is because it is so applicable to real life. It is about a joyous outcome, but it's not just about that. It takes us through the human emotions of being down and out. It talks about crying and weeping, feeling like your soul has descended to the deepest depths, and even a time when God felt hidden.

Can you remember a time you felt that way? For some of us, it may have been a few years or even decades ago. For others, it was just yesterday. As human beings, we go through the natural vicissitudes of life, the ups and downs that everyone has. Sometimes the downs are deeper than others, when it can even feel like the light of life begins to fade. The psalmist seems to have had a similar traumatic experience, when he describes his soul going down to Sheol and crying out to God.

I know a little something about these dark depths myself. I experienced them in the stressful years of trying to have kids, which hit rock bottom with what they term an adoption miscarriage. After months on end of adoption paperwork and waiting, we were thrilled to have been matched with an

unborn child. For several months we talked weekly on the phone with the birthmother, excitedly set up the nursery in our house, and friends even threw baby showers for us. Then only a few weeks before the due date, we received a devastating call from the adoption agency that everything had fallen through.

In less than a two-minute conversation, I felt my world come crashing down. All our dreams of this new baby, who already felt like a part of our family, were gone in an instant. I was angry, sad and in shock all at the same time. It was very hard to even process what had happened. I went home, got on my knees in the nursery and just wailed. I'm pretty sure I even yelled at God. I know I cried out, "Why?" over and over. It was gut-wrenchingly painful.

Many friends at the time told me, "It's going to be okay." I believed that too, but I wasn't there yet. I would reply, "It will be okay, but it's not okay right now, and that's okay." In other words, I also believed it was going to be okay in the long run, but in that moment it didn't feel even close to okay. I knew I needed to give myself permission and time to grieve properly. I felt that glossing over the pain then would only have caused it to resurface later. I knew if I could walk through it in the moment, my emotional wounds would heal better, and that would be healthier for me in the long run.

That's one reason I love the Psalms and often tell those walking through a hard time in life to read them. Because so many psalms, like this one, acknowledge and validate the reality of both the joy and pain in life. And it seems to me what we see over and over in the Psalms and throughout the

Bible is that it takes faithful perseverance to make it through the tough times. And hence the decision on the sermon title.

The frequency of the theme of perseverance in the Bible as a whole confirms its theological importance. In Daniel: Happy are those who persevere (12:12). In Romans: suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope (5:3-4). Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer (12:12). In Hebrews: Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us (12:1). In I Timothy: Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them (4:16). And in James: Those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget, but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. (1:25).

The word perseverance means steadfastness, constancy, and endurance. In the Bible, it is the characteristic of people who, even faced with the greatest trials and sufferings, do not deviate from their deliberate purpose and their loyalty to God. Faithful perseverance requires both dedication and endurance.

In many ways, it's also the qualities our nation was founded upon and what has sustained us. We would likely not be celebrating our nation's independence this weekend if it weren't for the faithful perseverance of our nation's forefathers and mothers and our current military and veterans, not only on the battlefields, but perhaps more importantly, in life.

One of the most amazing stories of perseverance I've heard is that of that of

Louie Zamperini. Most of you know his story from the bestselling book *Unbroken*. The book details his unbelievable experiences during World War II of surviving a plane crash in the Pacific, then surviving 47 days at sea on a raft, only to be washed ashore and whisked off to spend two and a half years tortured as a Japanese prisoner of war. It was as if he could not get out of the depths of Sheol. Talk about faithful perseverance.

And his dark days didn't end with the war. Like many combat veterans and prisoners of war, when he returned to the United States, he suffered what would now be termed Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. He spent four years trying to run, smoke and drink the nightmares away. It was only with his wife's encouragement that he reluctantly agreed to attend a Billy Graham crusade in 1949. Graham's preaching reminded him of his prayers during his time on the life raft and imprisonment, and it was then that Zamperini recommitted his life to Christ. And although he had been classified as killed in action in 1943 when they couldn't find him at sea, he actually lived to be 96 years old, spending the last 65 years of his life dedicated to Christ and helping others find God, including working at a Presbyterian Church. Despite all of his incredible hardships, and because of his faithful perseverance, he was indeed unbroken in life. He went from the depths of despair to the heights of joy.

As did the psalmist. This psalm illuminates the difficult realities, ambiguities and uncertainties of our lives, and yet also offers phenomenal encouragement of the transition of sadness and mourning into dancing, being clothed in joy, a lifetime of God's favor, healing, restoration to life, and one of the best-known Bible verses, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy

comes with the morning.” (v5b) This passage indicates you may not feel okay for that night, and who knows how long that night may last for you, but it will be okay when the morning comes. And the promise is that it will come. It came for the psalmist. It came for Louie Zamperini. And if you’ve seen my two beloved children, you know it came for me.

The Latin roots of the word persevere means through and severe. It indicates action, moving through the severe situation. It does not indicate getting stuck in that situation. And that’s why faithful perseverance in life is so critical. It’s a way to be unstuck. It’s a way to keep going through tough times, even ever so slowly, and it’s a way to acknowledge that the only way to keep going is through our faith in God. It doesn’t mean the severity of the situation won’t be stressful or difficult, but it does mean it won’t last forever, that there will be joy in the morning.

So far we’ve been talking about our own faithful perseverance this psalm represents, but here’s the twist—it’s also about God’s faithful perseverance. The Lord our God that this psalmist writes about so elegantly is always faithful to us. Even when we are in the pit, even when we yell at God, even when we feel numb to everything, and maybe even especially when we lose our faith in God, God never loses faith in us. God’s belief in us is steadfast, constant, enduring and persevering. God never gives up on us. Listen to how the psalmist describes the Lord as actively present in the midst of strife—drawing up, healing, lifting up and restoring to life.

No wonder this psalm is so full of praise and gratitude. Having made it through a devastating experience, the psalmist now feels a new lease on life,

and is moved and motivated by God's love and faithfulness to him. He extols the Lord, offering thanks, praise and gratitude. His joy cannot be contained. And he invites God's faithful ones to also sing praises and give thanks. This is a psalm written about an individual's experience, but it becomes a song of the entire nation joining in expressing gratitude to God.

In a way, this psalm is similar to *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies* that we sang together this morning, a national hymn offering gratitude for God's blessings upon us. As we celebrate our nation's freedom this weekend, giving thanks for veterans like Louie Zamperini, who faithfully persevered on behalf of our country, let us also take time to celebrate and give thanks for our ever-faithful, persevering Lord, who through all the ups and downs in life, indeed sheds His grace on thee.

All glory and honor be to God the Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.