



Sunday, Nov. 8, 2020

Sermon Series: Strength for Today, and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Strength for Today, and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

2 Corinthians 8:1-7 NRSV

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

One may find it foolish, audacious even, on a day like today to preach a sermon entitled Strength for Today, Bright Hope for Tomorrow.

Though the election is over, whether our candidates won or lost, we now are called to dig out of an era of dystopian political theatre, and turn our time and energy toward healing the fractured and divided segments in our country.

On top of this, we're weary of the pandemic – though the only way past it is to abide by the expert advice of medical professionals, and keep in the forefront of our minds and hearts our Christian duty to love our neighbors as ourselves.



We yearn for racial equality, where all God's children may have an equitable share in society, and at the same time, many still fear that "our way of life" is disappearing.

At the heart of all of this is an ongoing dis-ease for all of us, liberals, conservatives, rich, poor, Christians, Muslims, and secularists - that we have left somewhere familiar yet have not arrived at a new destination. And truth be told, we're not really sure how or when we're going to get there - or what that even looks like. So, why preach a sermon called Strength for Today, Bright Hope for Tomorrow in a week like this? Because isn't that what we need right now? Isn't that what God has called God's people to throughout every generation that has experienced adversity and dis-ease? We all yearn for strength and a sense of hope that a better future is possible, right?

Scholars would call what we are experiencing right now a "liminal space" - an in-between, unsettling and disorganized space where the past no longer fits the present, and the future is yet to be formed. Liminal spaces are points of potential transformation. They are the seed bed for new possibilities, for creativity and innovation. It's in liminal spaces where rules and relationships can be renegotiated. At the same time, these spaces can also tend toward chaos and conflict. Enter American society in 2020 as Exhibit A.

Liminal space happens at natural crossroads in life: after the break-up of a relationship, before the start of a new job, during a pregnancy, or in the vigil before a death. These can be painful, yet holy times. They aren't places where we often seek to go unprovoked, but when we do, there is a gift, a grace that can meet us there.

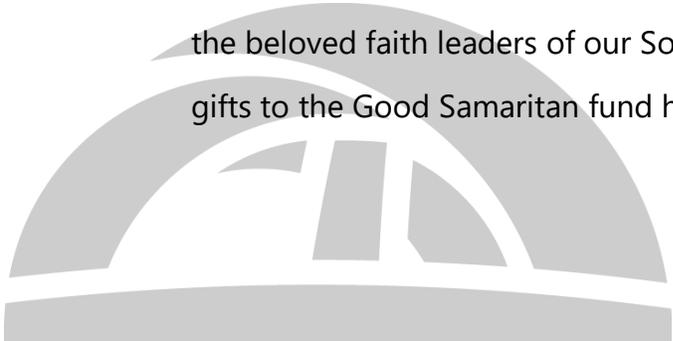




These are times when we naturally turn to our faith in God. After all, God has always been the one to lead God's people forward into ventures where we cannot see the ending. We rely on our church to give us strength in the midst of the challenge, and hope for what comes next.

Through these last months, I've been witness to God's grace working in and through you, dear people of God, as we have sought to be God's people in this liminal space. Through your faithfulness, God has been working in you to give strength and hope to others when you've called members to see how they are doing during the pandemic. You have given me hope, not just now, but for the future, when you've shared stories of how you are sharing faith with your kids at home. Your financial generosity has been a grace as staff members have had to adapt all kinds of ministries. It has taken unexpected resources to stream worship here in the Fireside Room and figure out how to provide safe and effective outdoor worship on the lawn and in the parking lot. Many of you have continued to find inventive ways to serve beyond our congregation and care for the needs of others, all while doing your best to keep those we serve safe and healthy.

This spring, we invited you to give above and beyond your regular giving to the Good Samaritan fund. We use this fund to support people who are having financial struggles. You responded with overwhelming generosity. In two weeks, members of Zumbro gave over \$15,000 so that those who faced uncertainty during the pandemic could find some relief. These gifts have helped Zumbro families pay for rents or mortgages when jobs abruptly ended or when they had to quit their job to take care of a loved one. It has provided food support to some of our elders. It has paid for temporary housing for women escaping domestic violence when the Women's Shelter was full. And when Mama Rachel Arol, one of the beloved faith leaders of our South Sudanese community died of COVID this summer, the gifts to the Good Samaritan fund helped her family return her body to South Sudan for





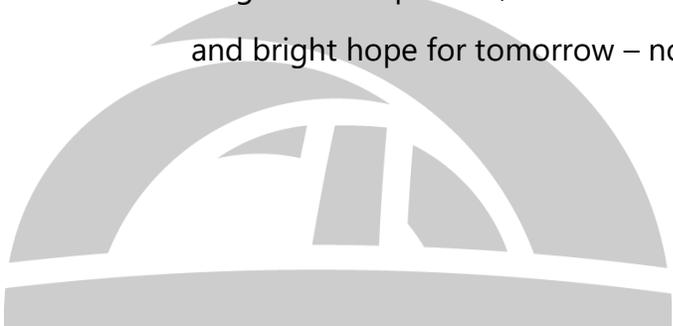
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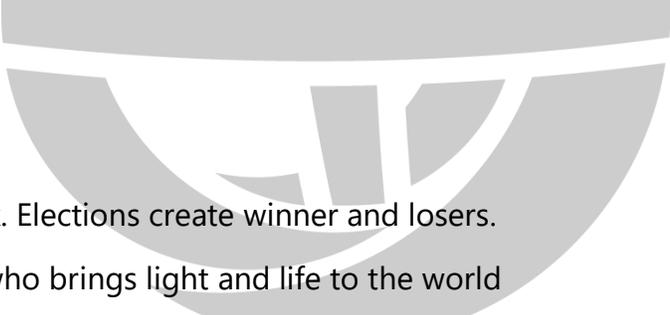
God has been at work to bring transformation in this liminal space. Through your generosity of time, talents, and treasures your commitment to be open to new possibilities are providing strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, even when we aren't doing church as usual. This has been the church's story for a long, long time.

The Apostle Paul was in the center of one of the most significant liminal spaces in history. The story of Jesus captured the hearts and faith of people from all kinds of different classes, and cultures. The Spirit led Paul to bring God's Good News that was rooted in Judaism to Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. There was no road map for sharing the faith of Jesus with people who didn't have much experience with Judaism. There were no how-to books for how to grow a church in a culture that was not his own. There was just the power of the Spirit moving in and through him and those who heard the Good News. And together, Paul and his team of evangelists, like Titus and Timothy, shared their deep conviction that Jesus offered a grace that could only come from God. Their faith in Christ's grace provided strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, and so much more.

As the church spread, Paul worked to strengthen the church abroad and sustain the Church in Jerusalem. Christ's church was not whole unless the whole body was healthy. And so as the gentile church grew, he gave witness to God working through their generosity toward the church in Jerusalem. After all, without the faithful witness of the first church in Jerusalem, the Gospel would have never reached them. And without the generosity and faithful witness of the church from generation to generation, and continent to continent since then, we may not know the love of Jesus the way we do today.

Friends, we are living in a significant in-between time, a liminal space, where the past no longer fits the present, and the future is yet to be formed. Yet, we have strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow – not because a vaccine may be around the corner to end this





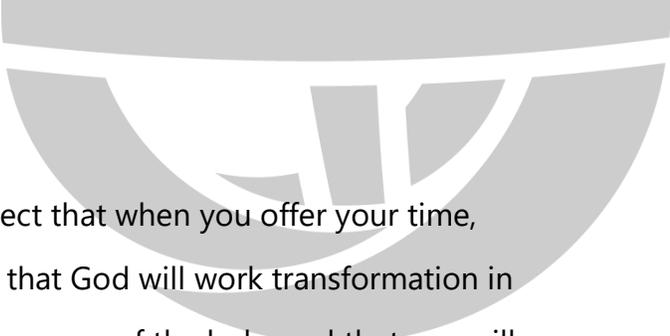
pandemic, or because an election took place this week. Elections create winners and losers. No, we all have strength and hope because of a God who brings light and life to the world still today. We have strength and hope because God calls us into this light and life, and unites us around a vision for the world where we all have a place to belong. The Spirit compels us to grab hold of this vision, to build bridges of understanding and peace, to reach out with compassion, to share the hope that we have in Jesus with family and friends and neighbors who may still be feeling the deep effects of these disorienting times.

I said at the start of this pandemic that the church has never closed, it has simply been unleashed wherever we, the faithful, are. We are planning for Zumbro's mission and ministry for the next year. But we know that ministry is not going back to some kind of "normal" at the start of the year. As we plan, we will be developing ways that we can nurture connections with one another, even as we are unable to regularly gather in large groups. We will equip one another to nurture our faith and the faith of our children in the home and in small groups, online, and hopefully in person. We will continue to love our neighbors, seeking ways to meet the needs of our community, and share hope together. And we will be looking to expand our digital footprint to help us stay connected, and to reach beyond our local community. I suspect that we will learn some new things along the way.

I'm grateful for the ways that technology have helped us stay connected and helped us reach family and friends and new people who just happened to find us online. Near the start of the pandemic, I received a note from a man from Maple Grove. I don't think he has ever been to Zumbro, but he started worshiping through the livestream. Not long after that he started sending a weekly offering because he experienced something holy happening here, he felt a connection and wanted to support the work God is doing through us. It was a grace I didn't expect.



If you are looking for strength today, or hope for tomorrow, step into what God is doing in your midst. Be open to the transformation that can come when things feel upside down.



Offer yourself as an unexpected grace to others. I suspect that when you offer your time, talent, and treasure, toward God's vision for the world, that God will work transformation in you. That some of the challenges you face will take on a sense of the holy, and that you will indeed find strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow. Amen.

