



June 20, 2021
Sermon Series:
Eight Encouraging Words from God

You Are Called to Persevere
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Isaiah 40:27-31 (NRSV)

²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God"?

²⁸Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

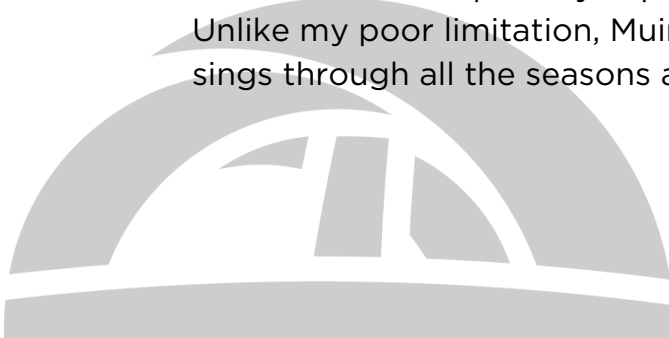
²⁹He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.

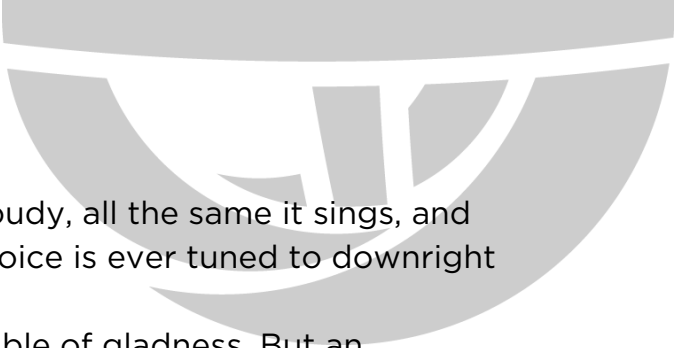
³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;

³¹but those who wait for the LORD
shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

A favorite bird of the great naturalist, John Muir, was the water ouzel. Have you heard of it? The water ouzel isn't much to look at, just a plain, chubby gray bird that often perches along the edge of a mountain stream. Muir studied the ouzel hunting for food, plunging into a cascading stream and disappearing into the froth. It went under the icy-cold torrent for nearing a minute, and then burst out of the water upstream. And with a shake of its feathers, it landed on the ledge as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

Muir was especially captivated by the ouzel's sweet song: zeet, zeet, zeet. Unlike my poor limitation, Muir wrote about the song in glowing terms: "The ouzel sings through all the seasons and every kind of storm. However dark and





boisterous the weather, snowing, blowing, or cloudy, all the same it sings, and never with a note of sadness. Its mellow, fluffy voice is ever tuned to downright gladness.”

Of course, we don’t know if birds are capable of gladness. But an interesting question comes of this: Why does the ouzel seem glad to us? John Muir suggests it’s because the bird finds a way to sing even in the face of adversity.

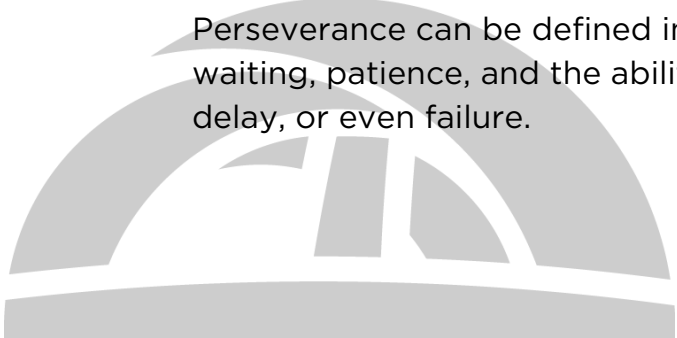
I like that! I like it especially because we’ve had lots of adversity lately, and we could use a little gladness. Muir’s description implies a release. It comes after a difficult math test, the completion of a hard project at work, finally sitting down to a conversation you’ve been avoiding for a long time. To be glad is to be relieved, to be sprung free from anxiety. It doesn’t come because of the absence of problems. It comes because we find a way through them, sometimes even a way to overcome them. Gladness is the ability to sing in the face of adversity.


The exiles in Babylon were learning to sing. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, they’d been languishing in exile for a good long time – close to 50 years. Then a prophet in the line of Isaiah comes along – let’s call him Second Isaiah. He starts preaching about things they hadn’t thought about in a long time. He announces comfort. He says they’ve suffered long enough. He hints that God has a plan to give them a future with hope, and that might mean a chance to go home.

The sermon doesn’t get very far, however. The Israelites are surrounded by the shiny, powerful idols of Babylon. The people have grave doubts that their god Yahweh could lift, would lift a finger to help them. They feel all but forgotten. Second Isaiah keeps preaching anyway. We preachers can be a stubborn bunch: “Why do you say, O Israel, my way is hidden from the Lord? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord God is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

Isn’t it interesting: the prophet doesn’t start his sermon with history – the exodus from Egypt, the entrance into the Promised Land, the building of Solomon’s magnificent temple. No, he starts with nature – “this is my Father’s world.” And he makes a bold claim, holding up Yahweh as the creator of the ends of the earth. You can almost hear John Muir, waxing poetically about that chubby, gray ouzel, which somehow manages to sing in every season of life, even in the face of adversity.

There’s a word for this kind of persistent singing. It’s called perseverance. Perseverance can be defined in any number of ways, but essentially it involves waiting, patience, and the ability to keep doing something despite difficulty, delay, or even failure.





It's not hard to find examples: Thomas Edison going back to the drawing board again and again as he worked on the lightbulb; the development of vaccines at warp-speed to combat COVID-19; a rover sent to Mars, complete with a little helicopter, to further our understanding of God's great big world. And the name of that rover? Perseverance.

Will the exiles be able to sing, to leave their doubts behind and trust in Yahweh again? We don't know. Will they come to believe that those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength? We don't know. Will they someday mount up with wings like eagles? We don't know. Perseverance can be one of the hardest things in the world, particularly because of life's uncertainty.

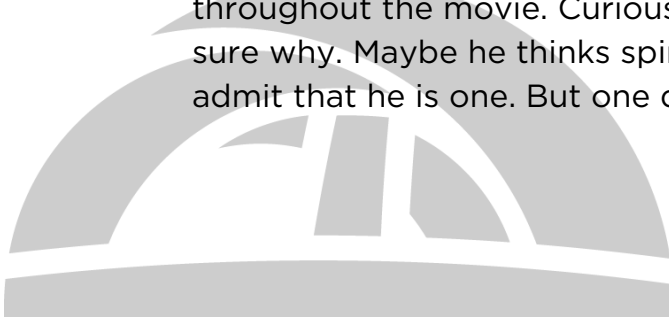
Norman Vincent Peale holds up the importance of hope during our uncertainty. Hope is powerful, he says, because in it lies the power of the human soul to live as if God's promises are going to come true. Some think of hope as an emotion, says Peale, but I see it more as a discipline, a determination to believe in God's possibilities, even when the world is crashing down all around us.

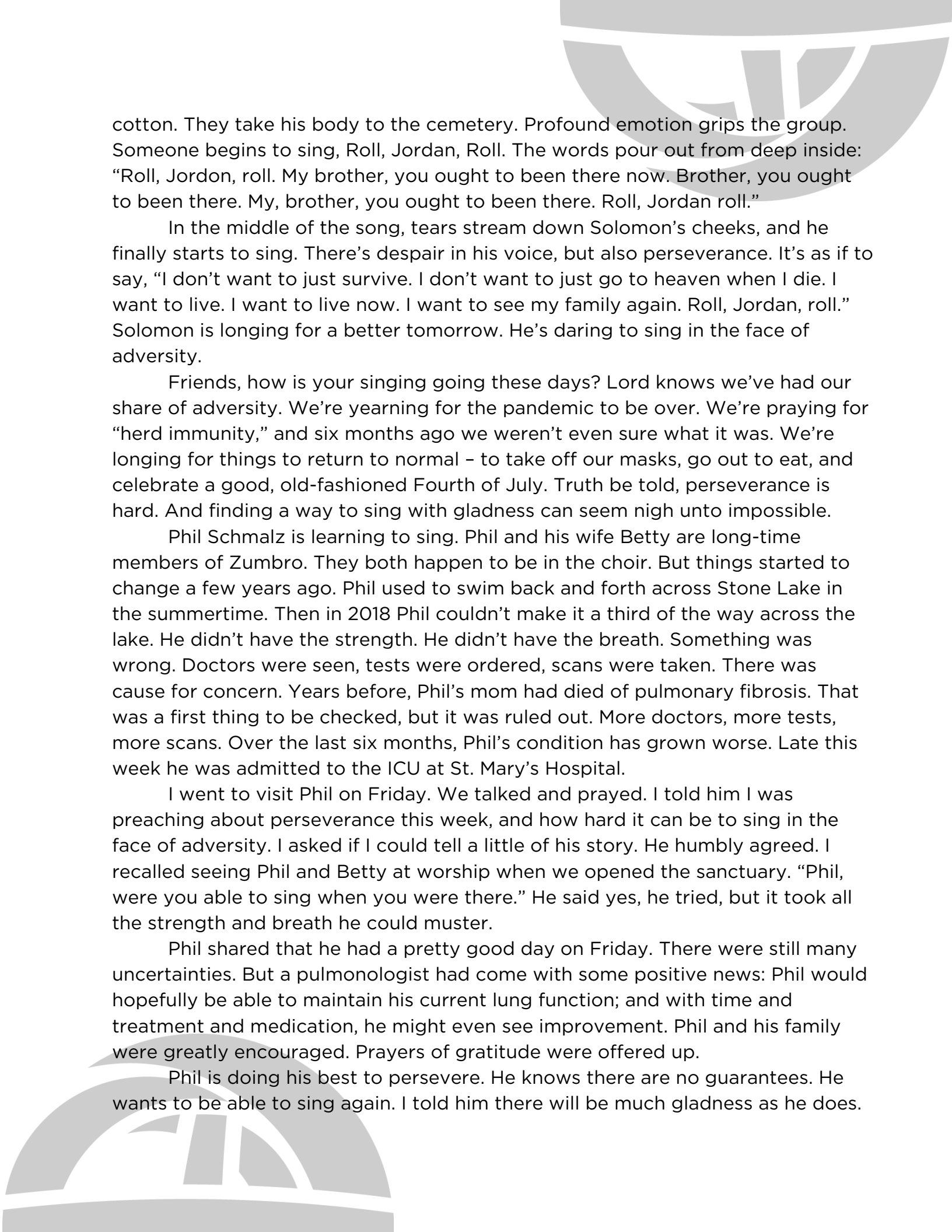
Hope is at the center of perseverance! It flies in the face of calamity, saying, "The world can do its worst to me, but I'm not giving up. I will keep hoping! I will keep singing!"

Solomon Northrup was learning to sing. I thought of Solomon this past week as Juneteenth was declared a national holiday. As we've learned, Juneteenth marks the end of slavery in America. It came a full two months after the Civil War had ended. Union soldiers arrived in Galveston, Texas to share the news with a last group of slaves.

Perhaps you've seen the movie 12 Years a Slave. It tells the story of Solomon Northrup. It begins in 1841. Solomon is a black man who's living with his wife and two children in Saratoga Springs, New York. He's a free man, earning a living as a carpenter and a fiddle player. One day Solomon is lured by a pair of men into earning extra money touring with a circus. He gets kidnapped and sold into slavery. He's forced to work on two different plantations. Life is unbearably hard. It's even harder when the owner justifies slavery by quoting scripture. Solomon does a variety of jobs. When it's time to harvest the cotton, everyone is expected to pick at least 200 pounds a day or else get beaten. Literally, picking cotton is a matter of life and death. Solomon is instructed not to tell anyone he's a freeman, because he's not. He's told to pretend he can't read or write, because he's a slave. Somehow he finds a way to get by, but he's not really a human being.

Will Solomon be able to sing? There are many spirituals that are sung throughout the movie. Curiously, Solomon never joins in. He refuses. We're not sure why. Maybe he thinks spirituals are for slaves, and to sing them would be to admit that he is one. But one day a friend of his dies in the field while picking





cotton. They take his body to the cemetery. Profound emotion grips the group. Someone begins to sing, Roll, Jordan, Roll. The words pour out from deep inside: “Roll, Jordan, roll. My brother, you ought to be there now. Brother, you ought to be there. My, brother, you ought to be there. Roll, Jordan roll.”

In the middle of the song, tears stream down Solomon’s cheeks, and he finally starts to sing. There’s despair in his voice, but also perseverance. It’s as if to say, “I don’t want to just survive. I don’t want to just go to heaven when I die. I want to live. I want to live now. I want to see my family again. Roll, Jordan, roll.” Solomon is longing for a better tomorrow. He’s daring to sing in the face of adversity.

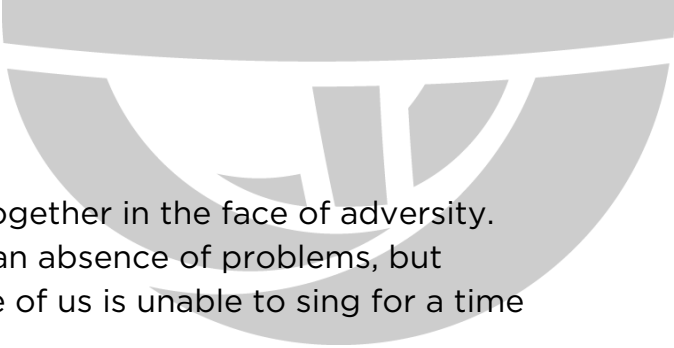
Friends, how is your singing going these days? Lord knows we’ve had our share of adversity. We’re yearning for the pandemic to be over. We’re praying for “herd immunity,” and six months ago we weren’t even sure what it was. We’re longing for things to return to normal – to take off our masks, go out to eat, and celebrate a good, old-fashioned Fourth of July. Truth be told, perseverance is hard. And finding a way to sing with gladness can seem nigh unto impossible.

Phil Schmalz is learning to sing. Phil and his wife Betty are long-time members of Zumbro. They both happen to be in the choir. But things started to change a few years ago. Phil used to swim back and forth across Stone Lake in the summertime. Then in 2018 Phil couldn’t make it a third of the way across the lake. He didn’t have the strength. He didn’t have the breath. Something was wrong. Doctors were seen, tests were ordered, scans were taken. There was cause for concern. Years before, Phil’s mom had died of pulmonary fibrosis. That was a first thing to be checked, but it was ruled out. More doctors, more tests, more scans. Over the last six months, Phil’s condition has grown worse. Late this week he was admitted to the ICU at St. Mary’s Hospital.

I went to visit Phil on Friday. We talked and prayed. I told him I was preaching about perseverance this week, and how hard it can be to sing in the face of adversity. I asked if I could tell a little of his story. He humbly agreed. I recalled seeing Phil and Betty at worship when we opened the sanctuary. “Phil, were you able to sing when you were there.” He said yes, he tried, but it took all the strength and breath he could muster.

Phil shared that he had a pretty good day on Friday. There were still many uncertainties. But a pulmonologist had come with some positive news: Phil would hopefully be able to maintain his current lung function; and with time and treatment and medication, he might even see improvement. Phil and his family were greatly encouraged. Prayers of gratitude were offered up.

Phil is doing his best to persevere. He knows there are no guarantees. He wants to be able to sing again. I told him there will be much gladness as he does.



After all, that's what God's people do: we sing together in the face of adversity. We know that our gladness doesn't come from an absence of problems, but because we find a way through them. And if one of us is unable to sing for a time and a season, then we sing for each other.

Friends, as we come out of our pandemic, we're going to have to learn to sing all over again. We'll be in good company. Like the water ouzel, we'll sing in the face of adversity. Like the exiles in Babylon, and Solomon Northrup, and Phil and Betty Schmalz, we will lift our voices in song with all the gladness we can find.

Our song will have a familiar refrain: "Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

It's a song we need now more than ever! Amen.

