

Reflection
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October 23, 2016
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

From Paul's second letter to his friend, today's reading comes midway through the letter. Paul is in a prisoncell, chained, alone, aware that his death is imminent.

Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

6 As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come.

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

8 From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

16 At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them!

17 But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

If you know much about my life's journey these past two years, you might not be surprised that I opted for the passage that talks of impending death. For those of you who do not know, my beloved husband of thirty years died after a brief illness, nearly two years ago.

Like Paul, Greg knew his death was coming, knew his life's end was far closer than its beginning or middle. Paul was facing execution from a prison cell, Greg was waiting the clock out on a diagnosis that could not be reversed, his cancer would not ebb, but his life would. Although fear and sadness often gripped us, there was great beauty in watching this part of Greg's life journey unfold. There was great beauty in moving forward into life and away from the paralyzing fear of death. We leaned heavily on hope; the faith that God's love would see us through even those times and places where the fog was so thick that we could not see much of anything that lay ahead, times and places where the terrain was so rocky we could not see where to set our next footstep or find our next handhold. So we did not think, we walked. It was a walk from fear into life for Greg and for me.

I hear in Paul's letter a pep talk to himself as much as a message to his protégé Timothy. In his plea that God not judge those who deserted him, in his assertions to Timothy that he had "fought the good fight" perhaps he was convincing himself--- as part of the necessary letting go of control (could Paul have been a control freak like so many of us?) — that he was good enough, that he needed to forgive those around him, that God was right there with him. And maybe he was hoping for some support, some confirmation from Timothy that, yes, he had done well, he was good enough, he was not abandoned in that prison even though he was alone. I have a sense that he was also experiencing the same freeing phenomena I saw Greg experience—that trite "let go and let God" moment that is really not so trite at all. Like most deep truths, it is so simple it is difficult to comprehend. We are not in charge of our lives we are charged with living them. This is both a heavy weight and an enlightening truth.

Paul, you might notice, proclaimed that God had delivered him from the lion's mouth, not from the lion's belly. Delivered not from death but from psychic pain. He was delivered from being gobbled up by the strong jaws of fear, delivered from being torn apart by the sharp teeth of

worry, from the suffocating power of regret bearing down hard; delivered instead to appreciation for each present moment of living. That small change of focus has huge implications—spending our precious moments living rather than trying to repair the past, justify ourselves or orchestrate the future.

I recall when this deliverance first came to Greg. We were sitting in our living room in our matching wingback chairs. He looked up at me with terror in his eyes and told me that he did not want to die, that he was afraid. This was September, about halfway between his diagnosis and his final day here on earth. I told him that I understood. In that moment, I was not sure where these words came from, but I am now. I told him that I did not think God allows us to die in fear, that I believe we come to a place of surrender before our lives end -- not surrender as in "I give up" but surrender as "I am ready for whatever each next moment brings". Surrender to living rather than to dying. Greg thought about it for a time, took a deep breath and said, "Okay." He did not seem fearful anymore. I had been so concerned that he would waste his precious time worrying, trying to beat the system, avoiding the unavoidable. He was a master at those skills. Trust me on that. But there was no time for that, Greg had so much more living to do and he was on a pretty tight schedule. I did not want him to miss out on any moments of life, I did not want to miss out on any moments of life with him. I reminded him we were here for living, not for dying. The present moment is all there is and should be our focus—not the past that cannot be changed or the future that is not guaranteed.

Greg came to a place of true joy in living. We seldom talked about his impending death—we did not dwell on medical test results, did not pay much attention to the hospice staff and their plans for pain management, did not tally up his list of good deeds or bad, did not visit the land of regret, did not make plans for his memorial service. He, we, lived. He took walks and watched the beauty of autumn unfold, he played music, visited with friends, read, he watched baseball, played with his grandchildren, laughed with his daughters, slow danced in the kitchen with his wife—cheek to cheek; each moment a precious jewel. He was vocally and genuinely grateful for everything from cups of ginger tea to sunsets. He was in love with living. He stopped fretting about the past or worrying about the future. I tried to do the same (with varying degrees of success), following his fine example. Life was good, so very good in those days that could have been otherwise had we allowed ourselves to hang out in the lion's mouth. Greg lived fully until he could live no more, until his time to move on was here. He did not waste any more moments waiting to die but spent them instead dancing in the light of this world. Dancing and singing as he was created to do—his life a testament to the truth that God has got us, has got this. Life is good. We are nothing but loved, nothing but enough, nothing but goodness. Greg understood that and one of the gifts of standing by his side through those last days of his life was that very lesson—one I still struggle to exemplify but I will keep trying.

The simple yet complex truth is that I—and we all—need only know (which is to say have faith) that God has got us, that we are good enough as long as we are living fully. We are not in charge of our lives but we are charged with living our lives. We need not waste precious moments on worrying or wondering or avoiding. Hard times and death will come, there is no avoiding or orchestrating them and trying to do so only gets in the way of our life's purpose. I hope Paul, and Greg, have reminded us of this so that we do not wait until we know our moments are nearly over to live in this most perfect way, not effort-full but love-full. God invites us to step out of the lion's mouth and into life. Don't worry, be happy. It sounds so simple. It is so simple. Really.