

1 Sermon, June 16, 2013

Texts: James 1:2-8, Romans 5:1-8, 2 Peter 1:5-10

Title: "Keeping the Faith" (keep the faith – God is with you.)

1. Life is Hard
2. God is good

1. Life is Hard

More than a month ago, Shirley Farr asked me if I would preach on keeping your faith in a troubled world.

I called her to make sure I knew what she was asking for, and she talked about all that's going on in the world: wars, shootings, storms, fires out west, rain & floods. There is so much tragedy.

One of her friends told her all this is going on because of the end times.

They're predicting a very active hurricane season this year, which could be interpreted as a sign of God's displeasure. But there's no way to know if a particular phenomenon is God's doing, or a natural occurrence based on other factors.

But there are also a lot of disturbing human factors that can lead to pessimism. Test scores dropped recently in many places. Families are in trouble. Think about the awful case in Wisconsin of a father killing his children in a fire for the insurance money.

There is a lack of respect. Teachers tell the story that it's much harder to be a teacher than it used to be.

Then there's the rise of radical Islam, which resulted in the 9/11 attacks and is responsible for slaughter in Sudan, persecution of Christians in West Africa, and the repression of women in countries where women had been finding their voice.

It's not all bad news. Reports of child abuse and neglect have dropped nationwide for the fifth consecutive year, and abuse-related child fatalities also are at a five-year low, according to new federal statistics.

The latest annual report from the Department of Health and Human Services estimates that there were 681,000 cases of child abuse or neglect in the US in the 2011 fiscal year. That's 42,000 less than five years before.

But there are still 681,000 children out there who need help.

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Life is hard.

None of us really knows the burden that our neighbor is bearing. We don't know the tremendous effort it takes some people to just survive, just keep their chin up.

And it doesn't really matter if the suffering is from end times, or global warming, or a communist conspiracy or just bad luck.

There are times that each of us suffers and wonders why. There are times each of us sees someone we love suffer, or some ideal suffers defeat. And we wonder why.

Life is hard.

Life is hard, but God is good.

2. God is good

God is good.

Today's reading from the book of James says:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

It was certainly a joy holding my 5-week-old granddaughter a week and a half ago. Yes, like the scripture talks about, we needed some endurance on the drive down there. The end of the trip was joy. Just looking in her eyes made me remember what gifts our own children were, and what a gift every child is. God is blessing us all the time with reasons for hope.

Children can certainly test our patience, but when we endure, it most often leads to an adult who we can be proud of. There is joy at the end.

The graduation ceremony at Columbus High School this year was a reason for hope. God has certainly blessed those graduates. Normally I don't like the idea of going to a graduation ceremony and hearing speeches full of clichés.

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But this was different. The speeches from the students were all fabulous. One of them was inspiring. One of them turned graduation clichés on their heads. The last one was a dialogue between Abe Glasbrenner (whom you know) and JT Cestkowski. That one was full of humor. Abe was the straight man, but it could have worked the other way around.

Abe said he looked up the definition of graduation, and found that it was the marks or degrees on the side of a flask for measurement.

JT said, "that works for me."

Then Abe said that another definition for graduation was the "Conferral or receipt of an academic degree or diploma marking completion of studies."

JT said, "I don't like that one."

Or something like that.

After the ceremony I could say that God is good, for giving those young people such love and support and teaching that they've grown to be great people.

Paul's letter to the Romans says:

Christ has also introduced us to God's undeserved kindness on which we take our stand. So we are happy, as we look forward to sharing in the glory of God. But that's not all! We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love.

Life is hard – but God is good.

So Keep the faith – faith in God's goodness -- Faith that the Holy Spirit is with us comforting and directing.

It won't all make sense, but keep the faith anyway. There's no way we can figure out why troubles come or even why good things come. But keep the faith.

In this last week, I talked to a bunch of people who gave witness to me that life is hard, but God is good.

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A widow told me how God was with her when her husband died. She's confident that God will be with her in the future, because God was with her then.

Another woman told me how she had had surgery for something else when they found out she had kidney problems. At the same time, they discovered her husband's bladder cancer, with which they've been coping for a year. Treatment is almost done, and the outlook is good for both of them. She told me that God had seen them through.

Still another woman talked to me. She and her husband had each been in the hospital recently, and she talked about all the good people that you meet at a time like that. Not only the staff, but some of the other patients who she got reacquainted with. God is good.

The second letter of Peter tells us to intentionally nurture our faith. How do you do that?

...support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual[b] affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful.

Keep the faith.

A pastor at annual conference talked about how God was with him when he almost lost his daughter.

There was no joy at that time, but there was a profound sense that God was with him and his wife. And that sense of God with them has remained.

Life is hard, but God is good.

I'd like to close with the words of a hymn that went through my mind as I was thinking about this topic. Let me sing it to you:

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

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Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
To guide the future, as in ages past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
His voice Who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart,
And all is darkened in the vale of tears,
Then shalt thou better know His love, His heart,
Who comes to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears.
Be still, my soul: thy Jesus can repay
From His own fullness all He takes away.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
When we shall be forever with the Lord.
When disappointment, grief and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Amen.

2 My friends, be glad, even if you have a lot of trouble. 3 You know that you learn to endure by having your faith tested. 4 But you must learn to endure everything, so that you will be completely mature and not lacking in anything. 5 If any of you need wisdom, you should ask God, and it will be given to you. God is generous and won't correct you for asking. 6 But when you ask for something, you must have faith and not doubt. Anyone who doubts is like an ocean wave tossed around in a storm. 7-8 If you are that kind of person, you can't make up your mind, and you surely can't be trusted. So don't expect the Lord to give you anything at all. (James 1:2-18, CEV)

2 My brothers and sisters,[a] whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; 4 and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. 6 But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; 7, 8 for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord. (James 1:2-8, NRSV)

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1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access[b] to this grace in which we stand; and we[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we[d] also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:1-8, NRSV)

By faith we have been made acceptable to God. And now, because of our Lord Jesus Christ, we live at peace[a] with God. 2 Christ has also introduced us[b] to God's undeserved kindness on which we take our stand. So we are happy, as we look forward to sharing in the glory of God. 3 But that's not all! We gladly suffer,[c] because we know that suffering helps us to endure. 4 And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope 5 that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love.

6 Christ died for us at a time when we were helpless and sinful. 7 No one is really willing to die for an honest person, though someone might be willing to die for a truly good person. 8 But God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful. (Romans 5:1-8, CEV)

5 Do your best to improve your faith. You can do this by adding goodness, understanding, 6 self-control, patience, devotion to God, 7 concern for others, and love. 8 If you keep growing in this way, it will show that what you know about our Lord Jesus Christ has made your lives useful and meaningful. 9 But if you don't grow, you are like someone who is nearsighted or blind, and you have forgotten that your past sins are forgiven.

10 My friends, you must do all you can to show that God has really chosen and selected you. If you keep on doing this, you won't stumble and fall. (2 Peter 1:5-10, CEV)

5 For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, 7 and godliness with mutual[a] affection, and mutual[b] affection with love. 8 For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus

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Christ. 9 For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. 10 Therefore, brothers and sisters,[c] be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. (2 Peter 1:5-10, NRSV)