

Steadfast Endurance Empowered by Hope

SCRIPTURE:
1 Thessalonians
1:2-3

November 21, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Several years ago, when we were building the Welcome Center, the contractors brought a steel beam and placed it on sawhorses in the space that—at the time—was little more than a poured concrete floor. They invited us, as a church family, to write our names on that steel beam. After the beam was covered in the signatures, it was placed as the support beam over the entrance to the Welcome Center. You can't see them, but there are names of friends and church family in the walls here. Some of you have your names there. Some who signed it have gone on to glory. But we are surrounded by the names of the faithful. We can't see them now; we just need to remember that they are there.

I often feel that way when I come in here. The names of the faithful are all around us and I find it inspiring. And one thing we know in our bones, to be a people of hope in this world, requires some inspiration. Because every day, the world brings news that makes us want to give up hope—give up hope that goodness can thrive. That the better angels of people can emerge. Paul knows that hope requires courage and grit and discipline. Hope requires taking the long view and to do that, we need inspiration and encouragement. While every day can bring bad, disheartening news, the truth is: encouragement and inspiration are also all around us. Sometimes faith is simply a matter of paying attention.

On May 27, 1992, a mortar exploded in the middle of Sarajevo. It was a common occurrence as what had been Yugoslavia was crumbling into ethnic divisions; old hatreds and injuries rushed to the surface. The bomb fell on a line of people standing outside a bakery waiting to get bread. Twenty-two people died and more than a hundred were injured. Vedran

Smailovic was a cellist in the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra. The next day, he dressed in his formal attire, carried his cello to the bomb crater, still stained with blood, sat down and played Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor. The next day, he returned and did the same. Varying his time, so that snipers could not anticipate it, he continued for 22 days. It was a tribute to those 22 lives who had been taken away so unfairly. It was a performance of defiance—creating something beautiful in the face of such horror. And it was an act of steadfast hope. He was holding on to the dream of peace, even though the threat of mortars were part of everyday life. He forced beauty into a place of atrocity, to insist that evil will not last forever, pain will pass, tomorrow can be a new day, not just today lived over again. He was taking the long view, not settling for the status quo. Hope is like that.

Paul says: I thank God for your steadfastness of hope. There is no other kind of hope—save that which is steadfast. If we can fix it today, if we can make things right today, we do not need hope. Hope is that which stands in the face of all that has gone wrong and insists that life can be kinder, more just, more humane.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said, "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope."¹ Niebuhr understood that hope is taking the long view.

The faith that we profess and share is a faith of big dreams. Of justice rolling down like waters. Of swords being beaten into plowshares. Of the world being redeemed and love being the currency of every relationship. To be a people of enduring hope, we do not expect that life to be realized today. I don't. I don't expect it, as Niebuhr says, in my lifetime. But hope means every day we live toward that promised day.

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, (1952).

We have said faith is work because it is not limited to what we think, but shows up in our choices. Love is labor because it is not limited to what we feel, but shapes our actions. Hope is the same. Hope is less an attitude and more a practice. Hope endures because it is a discipline. Vedran Smailovic didn't just wish that peace would come; he brought beauty, a reminder of our better angels. He lived his hope.

Paul says: I give thanks for your endurance which is empowered by hope. For the Thessalonians, hope was a requirement. Paul's ministry lasted from about the year 33 CE to 58 or so. About 25 years. The letters that he wrote were all written in the last seven or eight years of his ministry. As we said before, 1 Thessalonians was the first, written about year 50. During this time, Christian missionaries, like Paul, had gone to Rome and were preaching that Jesus was the Messiah. This created tension between these missionaries and traditional Jewish practice. There were riots. The Roman Emperor Claudius would tolerate no unrest, so he expelled the Jews, including Jewish Christians from Rome. Ran them out of the city. Professor Eugene Boring says it is likely that these refugees found their way to Thessalonica and tensions were high.²

Therefore, the people to whom Paul writes were viewed with suspicion by traditional Judaism, an argument that divided families. And now the Roman government was beginning to look upon followers of Jesus as national-security threats. Within a few years, Nero would be Emperor and Nero would persecute Christians.

For the Thessalonians, the very act of gathering together, of sharing the sacrament, of welcoming men and women, slave and free, Jews and Gentiles, all to the same table, was an act of hope. Hope is not simply an attitude, but rather a practice.

We clearly live in a different time, but our lives need to be shaped by hope as well. It is Stewardship Dedication Sunday. Pledging is an act of hope.

We baptize children today. We don't know who they will become, what great things they might do but we know this: They will need a church. They will need a community committed to the work of faith, the labor of love and the endurance of hope. That's

why your generosity matters.

During this past year, when people's hope has been stressed, we have provided food for the hungry in our community, like we are doing with Thanksgiving baskets this week. We have provided shelter, like we heard about from Kar Woo last Sunday. We have been a place of joy and friendship—the importance of which we see with new eyes after all we have been through. We have stood with people in their darkest hours, when grief came with a vengeance. We have baptized little ones and made a promise to them and to God that we will be a community where they can grow up to know they are loved by God and loved by us. We have expanded our ministry, as today we welcome online worshipers from across the country.

What I'm saying is that we are being the church and you are making it happen. It's a work of endurance that is fed by our hope.

I mentioned that we have names in the walls. We also have names in the room that inspire us. I want to tell you of a couple people who inspire me. Last weekend we held a session retreat. Our leaders gathered in part to welcome those whom you have elected to serve us as elders: Laura Ann Bowen, Carrie Craig, Jennifer Dierks, Jennifer Hart, Jeff Hutsell, Kathy Ray, Henry Sewing, Bob Wilhelm and Ron Witzke, and Ella Stewart as our youth elder.

I invited them to share their faith story. Henry Sewing talked of mentoring. Henry joined Brian Smith, Steve Schmidt and Mike Norris to serve as mentors in the Ivanhoe neighborhood. They started meeting with some young guys when they were in elementary school or maybe middle school. For about 10 years, they met with them, encouraged them, supported them. Henry said, at the least, we were with them almost every weekend.

But then, Antonio, a 19-year-old kid—good, young man, college-bound—like far too many, Antonio was a victim of gun violence. He was murdered. A few months later, another kid in the group, shot and murdered. After 10 years of spending weekend after weekend trying to give these guys a chance, guys who the world doesn't care if they get a chance, it was devastating. Henry said, "It shook my faith. I had a lot of questions for God." To see these young guys

whom Henry, Mike, Steve and Brian didn't just serve, but came to love, to have their lives snuffed out, was too much.

Henry said, "I didn't have it in me to continue. For a while, at least." But then he told us, "But I'm back. I am working with another kid: Javon. He needs me, so I'm going to stick at it."

Every day the world can break your heart. Every day injustice reigns and hatred blooms and heart-break is common and the world wants you to give up.

But remember the names in the walls and remember that inspiration is all around us. Pay attention. We are not alone in this labor of love; we are not alone in the endurance that is born of hope.

Jesus is Lord. In this world that can break your heart every day, remember Jesus is Lord. Love will win. Redemption is coming. There is never a day when we need to give up hope. Like Paul, I, too, thank God for your endurance that is generated by hope.