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We Do Not Lose Heart
Timothy Hart-Andersen
Sunday, August 22, 2021
II Corinthians 4:1-18

Last Wednesday, 75 of us gathered in this sanctuary to do something we had not done in a long time: we came together for an hourlong hymn sing. Yes, we were masked and sitting apart from one another, but we were determined to make music – to sing into the chaos of this time, to sing into the shadows that have descended upon the world, to sing into the despair creeping into our own hearts.

Someone outside the sanctuary that evening said they thought the room was full, such was the sound we made.

It was like those early pandemic images in Italy where people came out onto their balconies and sang

encouragement into the night against the disease. Or those neighbors in cities across America, including here in Minneapolis, who held outdoor singalongs from a safe distance each evening, to let the world know the pandemic had not won.

Sitting here on Wednesday, we called out hymn numbers as if throwing lifelines to one another. It was cathartic, and healing. Tears flowed freely as we sang our hope and witnessed to our faith.

“Hymn number 82,” someone cried out early in the evening:

“Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.”

With each song we gathered what we needed for the journey ahead: our shared pilgrimage through unrelenting anxiety all around.

The pandemic we thought was fading, has come back. Even if life-threatening mostly for the unvaccinated now, once again Covid colors every choice we make. Do we go to the ballgame? The restaurant? The wedding? Should I fear infection even though I'm vaccinated? How can I help my unvaccinated relatives set aside their reluctance? Is it safe for our children at school? Should I go to in-person church?

We've decided that all Westminster staff members must be vaccinated, and they are. And volunteers at church who work with vulnerable populations – children under age 12 and older adults – will now be required to be vaccinated, as well. Should we require proof of vaccination to attend worship or go to committee meetings or come to memorial services?

Things seem to be spiraling a bit out of control – and it’s not only the pandemic. It’s global warming and a planet on fire – even the Boundary Waters are now closed because the forest is burning.

It’s Afghanistan. It’s Haiti. It’s Israel and Palestine. It’s Cuba and Cameroon. It’s our cities and rural areas, the rivers and lakes. It’s the unrelenting mendacity in our politics and the bitter animosity it engenders. It’s the gun violence.

Danté Stewart writes for *The Witness: A Black Christian Collective*. His recent essay *When Everything Seems Fragile* speaks to the anger he feels as he watches his children living through and growing up in these times.

“But more than angry,” he says,

“I have been afraid and sad. I feel helpless, hopeless, as if a thousand lifetimes...could never prepare me

for how fragile life feels. We are living through way too much human pain, suffering, and confusion. This is not normal. Don't ever get used to this." (*Sojourners*, Aug 19, 2021)

As Christians, we are by temperament people who trust God will see us through whatever befalls us, personally or collectively. Followers of Jesus in every age have managed to find their way through affliction and persecution, injustice and sorrow, violence and hatred. After the long night of anguish, Easter has taught us, *we know the dawn will come.*

Last Wednesday we sang *My Life Flows On*, hymn number 821:

“Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing.
It finds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing?

No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I'm clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?"

Those words, written just after the Civil War in our land, echo what the Apostle Paul wrote to the young church in Corinth nearly 2000 years ago:

"Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, *we do not lose heart*... We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed..."

No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing?

There's resilience in Christian faith. We hear it, perhaps most clearly, in the poetry of our hymns. Listen to those we sing today.

Poets have made it their business to name the mess we face, and then hint at a way out, out of dangerous tendencies lurking near the surface in every human community and in every age, out of the paralysis of fear into which we can so easily slip. When we set those poems to music and put them in a bound book blessed by some ecclesiastical authority, we call them hymns.

But they're also still poems, like those Hebrew songs of old - meant to be given voice in times of trial. We sang Psalm 90 on Wednesday, hymn number 687:

“Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home:

Beneath the shadow of thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone,
And our defense is sure.”

So we do not lose heart.

With those words the Apostle Paul lays out the foundation of our faith: Jesus came among us as one of us; he preached and healed, died and rose, and conquered even death. His resurrection assures us we have nothing to fear – that *love triumphs in the end*.

Some may dismiss the claims of Christian tradition as a naïve approach to cruel reality, but our faith is not some pie-in-the-sky fantasy with no connection to how difficult life can be on this earth. In fact, just the opposite. Our faith has its feet on the ground.

The Jesus we follow is the one who goes into the hard places, to people damaged and wounded, to the suffering widow and excluded women, to the children shoved-away and migrants despised, to the uninvited and demon-possessed, to the ridiculed, violated, and crucified. Right into the *tumult and the strife*, right into the *stormy blast*, right into valley of the shadow of death. And there, where Jesus goes and where we follow, God's love burns bright.

"We have this treasure in clay jars," Paul writes,

"So that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

God chooses to put the treasure in clay jars, common vessels, breakable containers. *Like us*. Not in shiny, metal, unbreakable masterpieces of great beauty, but in the everyday bodies we inhabit and in the ordinary stories and lives we occupy. Within us – *even us, broken and frightened and despairing as may are* – there is an

extraordinary power that belongs to God, a power God shares freely with us. We don't have to go to some faraway place to find it. We don't have to measure up to someone else's standards to earn it. We don't have to become something we are not, and will never be, in order to be blessed by it.

We are the clay jars into which life-saving grace and forgiveness and love are poured.

So we do not lose heart. Instead, we keep on singing. We keep on listening to poets re-imagine their way into a world more just and kinder and full of hope. And we do this not merely for ourselves, but for the sake of others – the world around us.

“I choose to believe,” Danté Stewart writes, “That the world we hand to our children can be a little bit more loving and caring and liberating than the world that was handed to us.”

Songs are meant to be sung. Poems, meant to be heard.
And in the singing and in the listening, we, you and I,
begin to create the very dawn for which we wait.

“Did you rise this morning,” poet Audette Fulson asks,

“Broken and hung over
With weariness and pain
And rage tattered from waving too long in a brutal
wind?

Get up, child.

Pull your bones upright

Gather your skin and muscle into a patch of sun.

Draw breath deep into your lungs;

You will need it

For another day calls to you.

I know you ache.

I know you wish the work were done

And you

With everyone you have ever loved

Were on a distant shore
Safe, and unafraid.
But remember this,
Tired as you are:
You are not alone.
Here
And here
And here also
There are others weeping
And rising
And gathering their courage.
You belong to them and they to you
and together,
we will break through
and bend the arc of justice
all the way down
into our lives.”

(<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/prayer/prayer-morning>)

Last Wednesday, someone called for hymn number 436.

“God of compassion, in mercy befriend us,
Giver of grace for our needs all availing.
Wisdom and strength for each day ever send us,
Patience untiring and courage unfailing.

How shall we stray, with your hand to direct us,
You who the stars in their courses are guiding?
What shall we fear, with your power to protect us,
We who walk forth in your greatness confiding?”

The poetry pushes back against the gloom. We sing our
faith, and as we do, we find the treasure within, and hold
it up to light the way.

So we do not lose heart.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.