

“The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching.

Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress.

Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

It is not by running away from what we fear, - from the broken places in our lives, and other's lives as well - but by facing them, that we most powerfully discover God's grace. Each of us, all of us.

I hope you don't mind if I begin this sermon with a story.

Since I was just out West, in Colorado with my older brother the other week, I found this story in the local newspaper, the Boulder Daily Camera. Out west they are fighting forest fires, many of them. Back east here, we're bracing for hurricanes. This story captured my imagination and provides a striking and dramatic illustration of the way we are called to witness as servants of Jesus Christ, in an unconventional, but powerful way. It goes like this.

On the afternoon of August 5, 1949, fifteen young men, smoke jumpers for the U.S. Forest Service, were about to leap out of a Douglas 'C47 Skytrain' flying over Mann Gulch, just up the Missouri River in the Rocky Mountains of western Montana. They were between the ages of 19 and 25, all of them crack firefighters with at least 6 big fires under their belts, knowing exactly what to do. It looked like a regular ground fire from the sky.

They would get to it fast, dig a fire around the blaze, and likely be out by ten o'clock the next morning. That was their usual pattern in fighting fires.

But something unexpected happened that day when they got on the ground. The wind suddenly changed direction and the fire went up to the crown of the trees. Now, a crown fire moves much faster than a normal fire burning through timber. From down below it can sound like a railroad train, becoming a monster, as fires in the western mountains sometimes do.

The worst thing that can happen in a forest fire is that it turn into a blow up. This develops when a ground fire starts explosively throwing out flaming branches ahead of itself, starting spot

fires out in front. When that happens, a convection effect sucks oxygen into the space between the main fire and the forwarding fires, welling everything up into a conflagration: flames two hundred feet high, reaching temperatures a thousand degrees Fahrenheit or more. Something like this is what the men saw coming behind them as they raced toward the ridge and safety.

It was almost a hundred degrees already that day, the hottest temperature on record. They were running up an almost 40 percent slope, over long, slippery grass. The temperature by then was nearly 140 degrees, a point at which it is very difficult for humans to survive, especially while exerting any energy.

They got within two hundred yards of the ridge, but the fire was only fifty yards behind them and bearing down fast. Suddenly, Wagner Dodge, the veteran foreman of the crew, did something unheard of. Leading his men to the ridge, he pulled out his torch and lit a fire in the dry grass- right in front of them.

It burned quickly up the slope as he yelled to the others to jump into it with him. They thought he was crazy, trying to commit suicide. They all raced on up the slope instead, trying to make their way to safety. Meanwhile, Wagner Dodge lay down in hot ashes, covering his face with his handkerchief.

The fire caught the 14 others that day. They died that August 5. But Dodge survived as the main fire swept around the burned-out circle where he was left breathing what little air remained close to the ground.

Who would have thought of escaping a monster by burning a hole in the fire and lying down in it? It's an astonishing story. It is also a powerful illustration of wisdom borne by experience.

Our natural inclination, of course, is to flee from fire, to avoid the trying, testing, painful, challenging experiences that come into our lives, denying them, avoiding them, best we can. But we can't always deny or avoid.

God's way is not around the danger, but through it, it is not in escaping the fire that we survive, but in passing through it. In Isaiah the Lord says **"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."** (43: 2-3)

These words can be taken more than metaphorically. We all have tests & trials in life that we can't avoid—that we only survive by giving in to, taking them head on....

And it is not by our own strength that we take on trials—whether it be serious illness, divorce, death of a loved one, the loss of a job- or any other crisis. It is God's support of us, through prayer, our church family, friends and others that sees us through. It is our real hope in God; our

knowledge that the foundation of life is grounded and sure that gives us stability and confidence in living.

The Bible is in part a guidebook of how to take on obstacles in life, some we choose and others that come at us; few of them easy. This is part of what the Apostle Paul has to share in his letter to Timothy, encouraging him on to further faithfulness. This is ‘second generation’ language, passing on Jesus’ teachings, modeling his from those who had not personally known him: relying on the Holy Spirit and God’s grace to get it right.

Paul saw great things in Timothy; he was raised by a mother and grandmother, Lois and Eunice, who both modelled faithfulness and generosity.

Timothy made good on his potential; he was a leader in Paul’s small group of church planters in Asia Minor who is given these ‘coaching points’ as both a ‘pep talk’ and as guidance for his continuing ministry.

They come down to these main points: messages for us as disciples of Jesus. What we do as followers of Christ is not for ourselves, but for Jesus, who puts others before himself. Your example makes a difference, every day.

Don’t sell yourself short; don’t think that your youth or any other thing lessens the positive impact you have on others. So, keep practicing what you preach. Keep at it day by day.

There will be times when you will want to give up. There will be trials that appear too big, too complicated, too painful, that you wish would just go away by themselves. They likely won’t.

You are not alone in being faithful (though you may well feel that way.)

Most importantly, by going into your struggles, you will be supported;

By not avoiding them, you will live,

By facing them, you will be given life anew.

This is the promise Of God’s grace; such is God’s love in Jesus.

Amen.