

Sunday November 13, 2022
Enduring in Hope
by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

Good morning. Good morning! I have been missing you all while I took some time away from my internship to catch up on school work. And because I was missing you all so much, I was also praying for you. It's funny how those two things go together. When I miss you, I feel it in my heart and when I pray for you, I am holding you close to my heart—where God also dwells. So know that you have been with me in my thoughts, in my prayers, but especially in my heart this past week.

Now some of you know I am from Montana. Sometimes history feels closer there. It almost feels like recent events for those who live there. What I mean by this is my great grandmother gave me and my sister a copy of the Little House on the Prairie series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and as a child many of the stories I heard about the family farm and the stories I heard about Laura in those books were remarkably similar. Sometimes I was confused if my mother was talking about Laura and Mary and Ma and Pa or her own grandmother's life.

My great-grandmother, born in 1915, dropped out of school at the age of 12 to help her mother support the family by taking in laundry. So that would have been about 1927. My great grandmother did that for three years, and then got married at the age of 15, having her first child at 16. So she left home in 1930 with her husband to start a wheat farming homestead in North Central Montana just below the Canadian border. Their nearest neighbor lived ten miles away. As my great-gram told me, "I didn't have a childhood, until I had my first kid. That was the first time I ever experienced play." She raised three children, maintained a dryland wheat farm, and had a full life.

When her husband died in 1969, she remained living on the farm, working the fields and leasing the acreage to another farmer for the next 26 years. Now that is a long time to be alone on the land, with your nearest neighbor 10 miles away. Out there it's you and endless view all the way to the horizon. Out there is all the wind you could ever bear, because the wind never stops blowing. If you have ever taken the train through Northern Montana you might have passed through that district called the Hi-Line. One friend said, looking out the window of the train there was like seeing the landscape of the moon. The biggest emptiness they had ever known.

And yet, my great-gram endured. She stayed in her home after her husband had died, after all of her children had moved to towns hours and hours away. But how? In the face of all that emptiness, in the face of the unknown year after year, dependent on the weather to earn a living with no certainty of stability. How do you thrive in the face of that?

Now, she did more than endure, she thrived. She was never very committed to one church or denomination, so she rotated through them all in her community, one each week, Sunday by Sunday, month by month. She attended them all, and in doing so in the small town near her farm, she got connected. She got involved. She got to know almost everyone and she served the people around her regardless if it was the Catholic Christmas bazaar, the Methodist canned food drive, the Presbyterian quilters, or the Baptist mission fund. She immersed herself in the life of her

community, and in some ways, became the life of her small community through her service, her activity, her endless rotations of Sundays.

Yes, there was some gossip about her. Yes, to some she was a scandal. I mean, what were her and that local Catholic priest doing every week going for coffee in public like that for years? My great-gram said what they were up to was gabbing. Some people really didn't like her. In truth, she had a strong personality and strong opinions that went with it. But she didn't let it get in the way of someone who needed help. Of someone who had a need. She was a saint. Well, not exactly. She was a sinner, but that isn't the whole story. But in my imagination, because she passed away long before I ever became a Lutheran, I would like to think she approved of Luther and his theology. We are all saints, and we are all sinners too. All at the same time. It is a blessing, and it is a lot of work.

But why am I telling you about my great-gram? In today's readings, there are all sorts of hard times and bad things happening. It's going to be SO BAD they say. God is finally going to dish out all that punishment that has been coming to you, they should.

The prophet Malachi says, "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble." WOO-HOO we think! YES! THEY are gonna get it! FINALLY, we cheer, forgetting entirely that we too are sinners, that maybe we might just be a tiny bit arrogant (not me obviously, but maybe someone over here on the left of the pews). We forget maybe a few of us have done just a tiny bit of evil (not me personally and no one on the left side of the church, but maybe some of you here on the right side.) As sinners, we love to dish out judgement to others—even if only in our minds. But because we are also saints, we have hope and trust in God's saving work. We hope, that with the righteous, we too will be raised on healing wings. Freed from our distress, from the uncertainty around us. And there is uncertainty here with us in the pews. I am not afraid to name it. Christ Lutheran every year sets a budget in the face of an unknown financial future. We hope it will work out—we worry it might not.

Paul's letter second letter to the church in Thessaloniki, talks all about labor, about hard work, verse 8, "with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you." Paul means the dawn to dusk, backbreaking labor that my great-gram knew and so many of our ancestors or even we know so well working on a farm, working the land, managing the farm's livestock. "The animals never went on vacation," my great gram told me, "so we didn't get one either."

Paul is admonishing the church in this letter that there is still work to be done, that we can't just sit back in the pews and get that good feeling, gossip and catch up with some folks we haven't seen in a few weeks, and maybe have a cup of coffee before we go on our way. Now Paul calls them idlers and busybodies. He says, church isn't for good feelings, but bringing about the Kingdom of God. And it takes work. Luther might say if we want to be fed by God's grace each week at communion, then we need to go out and feed others, serve our neighbors all the rest of the week too. That good feeling that we get at church just isn't for us, it is for the whole world. My great-gram could have stayed on her farm after her husband died and minded her own business for the next quarter century. She could have sold the land and moved almost anywhere. But she decided to stay. And in deciding to stay, knew that if she was going to stay sane, stay

healthy, be whole, she needed other people. She needed to be connected. She needed to be involved. For us too, in order to be healthy and whole. For her, being among and serving her community was a whole way of life. As she fed others, she too was fed. As a congregation and as individuals we need to stay active and connected. We need to live and to serve, and yes even to live in the face of the unknown.

In the gospel today, there seems to be a lot of bad news. Maybe you feel like that right now with all the political messages we've been getting from both sides, from the endless news, even from the church council. The gospel says it is the end of the church (Temple for them), wars, family fights, prison, and lots of bad guys that Malachi's end times predictions didn't quite manage get rid of. It can be hard to see any good news among all the bad. We might not want to endure. We might even think it is easier to pull up stakes and start somewhere fresh. But I want to focus on that last line in the Gospel today, verse 19: "By your endurance you will gain your souls." That kind of makes it sound like if we just suffer long enough that things will turn around. I don't know about you but I hate that kind of interpretation. None of us wants to suffer—especially long-term. Thankfully, we might not have to.

If we look at the passage in its original Greek, there are some surprises waiting for us there. We might be able to see it differently than, "Yeah, it's going to be bad all the way down, but at least you get to go to heaven right!?" God, save us from the platitudes of well-meaning Christians!

The word endure in Greek it is hupomone: (hoop-om-on-ay) it means to remain behind, a patient enduring. It might even have a little grit and mean something like stubbornness. But I don't think, "By your stubbornness you will gain your souls" is what Luke was getting at. Though that can be good advice if you decide to stay put. Bring it on you think. Bring it on my great gram thought every year planting her crop.

That next word gain in Greek is ktaomai: (ktah'-om-ahee). Another word for gain is acquire to buy or obtain. But a secondary meaning means to learn or develop. As in you gain or acquire a skill by learning. Over time, you develop the ability to do things without even thinking about it. Like driving stick shift. When I started I had to think about EVERY SINGLE THING. BRAKE< CLUTCH< GAS<GEAR SHIFT <PANIC, and then one day through enough practice, I didn't think about it at all. I had gained a skill. Ktaomai. Endurance is a skill. It takes time and practice to develop.

The last word in verse 19, the word soul. In Greek it's psuché: (psoo-khay) breath, the soul but it's a little more subtle. It can also be understood to mean the vital breath, a vitality that makes us come alive. So instead of ¹⁹"By your endurance you will gain your souls." or by your suffering you will get into heaven, Boo. That's terrible. Instead we might understand it like this: By your remaining right where you are, by your patient enduring you will learn or develop a vitality, a new breath of life that renews you, that will revitalize you.

By remaining right here in the circumstances of your lives, with some patience, God will show you way that brings you back to life. Bring our congregation into new life, even facing an uncertain future. By remaining here at Christ Lutheran Church, even amid bad news, in the middle of difficulty, and with an uncertain future, God invites us to remain, to hope, to plant

seeds regardless of the weather forecast. And if we are patient, God will show us how to be of service to one another, how to bring new life the community around us, to the people around us and in doing so, how to feel our own soul come alive, overflow, renew us all. Think about how Jerimiah our One Parish One Prisoner's friend would have been different, if we had not been there to do the work!

This is both my hope and my promise to you this Sunday, running away from or ignoring our problems and difficulties will not save us. And every year the budget can feel like something we would rather ignore. Worrying about the future night and day, and focusing only on what we lack will not save us either. As Lutherans we know that we live in and with paradox. Sinner and saint, saved but not perfect. So too with our church. So too with my great-gram.

God is asking us to remain. God asks you to be a little stubborn. God promises us a future that will bring us new life. God invites us to practice generosity and service, to plant new seeds, in the face of an unknown future. We've had our financial difficulties, in the past year, there may be some storms ahead, but we will get there. With your help. With God's help.

Persevere the scriptures say today. Keep together, God says. Be patient and be generous with one another, Jesus proclaims, as I have been generous with you. There is new life here, the tenderest shoots, the tiniest green. It's coming, the Holy Spirit Whispers, It's coming. You just need to stay long enough to see it. It will soon grow. I promise you, you will be fed.

This is the Good News I have heard this week and bring to you this morning.