

Holding Fast and Standing Firm
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Several years ago, my daughter Elizabeth and I got into a discussion about sailors' tattoos. She had seen an exhibit about this in an Amsterdam museum, then we saw the movie "Master and Commander." In that film, a grizzled old sailor shows off his tattoos: the letters for "HOLD FAST" tattooed across his knuckles. Apparently this is a very common tattoo, and you can understand why. It is really important for a sailor to hold fast to a rope or a line, when working high up in the rigging during a storm. For some, the tattoo had an almost magical significance and power. For others, it just symbolized perseverance through adversity. My daughter was interested in this need for perseverance: it was sort of a theme in her life at that time. We were also planning a long walk of 270 miles in England that year. So, in lieu of tattoos, I had 2 bracelets made up for us that were engraved with "Hold Fast," and we wore them for the entire walk – a symbol of our intention to persevere in each other's company. Bracelets and tattoos: these are the ways that we humans sometimes try to express our deepest fears, longings and hopes, especially in the face of adversity and struggle.

We find verbal expression of those feelings, and of the threats that surround us, in the poetry of Scripture. The Psalmist writes a song of trust in God that begins with rhetorical questions. Whom shall I fear, since God is my light and salvation? Of whom shall I be afraid, since God is the stronghold of my life? Then it goes on to speak of the enemy, of evildoers and adversaries and foes. Many Psalms use this language, and I assume that, in the time that they were written, they were talking about actual armies, actual military and political threats to the safety of the singer. Today, though, I would like to imagine these metaphors differently.

This week I read the 27th Psalm as a prayer of confidence in God during a time of illness. We read, "When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh," and I think of all the ways that "our flesh" is assailed in our lifetimes. So often we are attacked from within, and the body becomes a battleground between the powerful forces of life and what seem to be insidious armies of destruction. We talk about "fighting" cancer or a "struggle" with mental illness. We battle signs and symptoms of aging with weapons of nutrition and exercise. All of us have experienced this, even if it is just "fighting off a cold." All of us have stood alongside of others who go through these trials, wishing we could fend off depression or infection for them. But it seems like these internal threats require internal strength, not an external solution. So often, all we can do is hold the hand of one who suffers and struggles.

The Psalm also seems like an honest account of the ways we move through these trials. The voice switches back and forth from prayer to self-address: he or she speaks to God and speaks to the heart. From an initial high point of confidence and hope, the speaker then turns to more anguished prayer: "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud... Do not hide your face from me... do not cast me off." And then it concludes with an even bolder statement of trust: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living..." and says to the heart, "be strong, take courage." In other words, "hold fast."

Even though this is a solo voice, the speaker is not alone. A beautiful phrase is used for this sense of protection and belonging: “to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.” To live in the house of the Lord seems to me to say nothing about a geographical location or a street address, but everything about being surrounded with divine care. In this place, the enemies do not magically disappear. But the head that has been bowed with trouble and threat and pain is lifted up to a stronger presence, a deeper reality. It is even possible “to sing and make melody to the Lord” in this place of safety and comfort.

The Apostle Paul has another metaphor for this deeper spiritual reality. He says, “our citizenship is in heaven.” He writes the letter to the church at Philippi from a Roman prison. He has suffered, in his missionary work, in almost every way: he has been beaten and shipwrecked; he has been vilified and rejected; he suffers from unnamed physical ailments. But this letter is very joyful and tender. Paul encourages the church in their trials: “Let us hold fast to what we have attained” and “stand firm in the Lord.” They do not do this strictly by their own power, but they consciously rely on God, and they consciously rely on each other. This is not an effort of the will, but a waking up to relationship. And as such, it is joyful and energizing.

Paul writes this letter as a citizen of Rome, subject to all the domination and oppression of that mighty empire. By declaring allegiance to another place, he is not suddenly released from prison. The bruises and aches and pains of his tumultuous journey do not disappear. By taking hold and holding fast to this new citizenship, he is able to lift his head to the light and salvation that comes from God through Jesus Christ. He sees the possibility of transformation, even as he is stuck in the mess and pain and bondage of life.

What could it mean for us to live as citizens of heaven or to live in the “house” of the Lord? A first step would be opening our eyes to the strength found in relationship with God and with each other. We all have need of this kind of strength. There are a million ways for us to show it and to share it. We accept the loving care of others when we are ill. We offer loving care when we see pain. We name the strength of relationship whenever we say our local church covenant together: that is our pledge of allegiance to the commonwealth of heaven. The verbs in that covenant are very telling: we walk together, we strive, we consecrate. No singular pronouns there. We hold fast to the promises of God, and stand firm with each other.

This subject of covenant leads me to think about our expectations of God – the God of the Psalmist, the God of Paul, and the God of Jesus, who persevered on the road to Jerusalem. If we are living in covenant, it is an exchange of promises. One could liken the promises of God to wedding vows, which say “in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow.” We are promised, not that God will make all the hard things go away, but that a steadfast presence will accompany us in our struggles.

We are not a “creedal” church: we do not use something like the Apostle’s Creed as a test of faith or a pre-condition for membership. Instead, we covenant with God and each other to walk in God’s holy ways. But I would like to close with a creed composed by the United Church of Canada. It says:

We are not alone,
we live in God’s world.
We believe in God:

who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.