

SERMON TITLE- "A New Page"

TEXT- 2 Corinthians 4

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Today we are looking ahead.

It has been a season of shaking- down to the very core of who we are.

We have taken communion and I trust that a cleansing took place for you.

But now we begin another step in moving forward.

Take a deep breath as the New Year begins- where do we stand now? What is the core of our message? Today we stand at the threshold of a New Year and like any threshold we do well to look ahead.

Today we will look at 2 Corinthians 4 and 5. In these chapters Paul lays out a foundational ministry message- one we all need to go back to whenever the world around us begins to shake. It also lays down the principles we need to move forward.

We will go through these 2 chapters in a slightly different order than Paul makes his argument- but it is his argument.

It begins-

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 Corinthians 4:1

First we do need to look back and Paul does that.

The fact that we face rough rides doesn't mean we are on the wrong course. We have talked about this a lot in the past 2 weeks. Why would anyone worry about losing heart? Because a shaking is going on. We will not lose heart.

And Paul does carry on-

Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. 2 Corinthians 4:2

What is Paul telling us here?

#1. Remember Basic Training

When we face a crisis we respond to it. Crises are chaotic and as we reflect back on what we did- we will face scrutiny and even criticism. In the middle of the crisis we don't have time to 2nd guess- we only have time to respond with the best instincts that our training has given us.

Those who are in combat often speak of "the fog of war." It refers to the chaos and confusion that goes along with a crisis. There is very little clarity at times like that. You often need to react instantly to complex challenges. The best that you can hope for is that your training has prepared you well.

And what was basic training all about- serving God with all our hearts and even as the fog of war overwhelms us we must go back to that place over and over.

Once the immediate crisis is over- we must look back and ask ourselves- did we really do it right? Are there things that we need to rethink?

These questions need to be asked and in the weeks ahead we will have to ask them many times.

And what is the guiding principle in this? Our only response is to determine to do right. That is a powerful statement of principle that we must never shrink back from. We have nothing to gain from anything but the pursuit of the truth.

But Paul doesn't stay in this spot and today we are going to move on as well. As far as it is tough dealing with tough times Paul adds-

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Make no mistake the trials we face are not trivial or easy- but Paul constantly works at putting them into perspective- and the perspective is the calling and hope to which we are called. All the trials we face here pale in that context.

So Paul instructs us and tells himself-

#2. Find The Right Perspective

Paul was able to face terrible trials and still keep moving forward. What kept him going? Was it just pure determination? That would have been the Roman way. One of the philosophies that were popular during Paul's day was called stoicism. Grit your teeth and keep moving. This philosophy taught that eternity was uncertain but doing the right thing on earth is still important so do right until the moment you die. And the Romans loved this philosophy and the games to the death that were played in the coliseum celebrated dying with stoic dignity.

You certainly can do worse than that but you will almost certainly run out of gas eventually if you try that.

Stoicism was not Paul's secret. Paul did not live for this life alone- in fact in a previous letter to the Corinthians he had written-

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. 1 Corinthians 15:19

That is quite a statement but it could hardly be clearer. If it is only for the benefit of our life on earth it really is not worth it looking heroic.

A. We Have An Eternal Perspective

We serve a cause that has eternal rewards and goals.

But as much as we know that we serve an eternal God that alone is not where our perspective adjustment comes from. There is another piece that we need as we begin to look forward-

What was it? What is the key we need to that we need to carry on with? We jump ahead for that-

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17

B. We Have A Current Perspective

That is the key, the secret if you will, of Paul's ability to face tough times. If we are in Christ- we are a new creation.

What does that mean? It means that the new beginning that Jesus, God's Son came to deliver to the world when He came to earth 2000 years ago- is alive in us. The message that the angels sang to the shepherds is alive in us.

And this is the message to us- we are the new creation! Yes we still feel the pain of things spinning out of control.

In fact in some ways, for us the pain can be even greater because we know that it is not just normal but is about being broken.

In spite of that, however, we ARE a new creation.

Just as our basic training is what we must go back to in the middle of the crisis- and judge our actions against that- so too this perspective is the measure that we are to use as we go forward and set our course.

One of the messages that I have been giving people in the last 2 weeks is, "Check your core." When hard times come we go through a rainbow of emotions and responses.

- disbelief
- anger
- grief
- resignation

What do we do with these? That is a difficult question. It is a little like asking a person who is being stuck with a needle- "What is the correct response to the pain?"

Should we cry out?

Should we jerk back?

Should we grit our teeth and take the pain?

The answer depends on who is sticking you with the needle. If it is a nurse giving you an injection- then we had best not jerk back- but is it wrong to cry out in pain?

The answer would be very different if you are being stung by a bee. Then the correct response is to avoid further stinging. Jerking away from the source of the pain would probably be the right thing to do.

That example is very simplistic but it does make a very important point. God built those reactions into our human wiring system and they have their place.

The difficulty is knowing what the right reaction is supposed to be. Do we suppress the pain? Do we withdraw? Do we strike out? Each has its place.

I don't have a sweeping answer but I have been telling people [and myself] "check your core."

In this context, as we look forward we must check our core to ensure that we are acting out of the reality of the new creation that God has made. If we keep going back to that we can- to that extent- trust the reactions we are having. I suspect for each of us each of the above reactions will have its time and place and none is where we are to stay.

So where are we to end up? Paul describes it directly-

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ . . . 2 Corinthians 5:18a

The place where we are to end is in a place of reconciliation with God. When his energy was gone and the "wasting away" of our beings seems to be complete, Paul knew where his true anchor was and when life was about to sweep him away- Paul knew he was reconciled with God and knowing that kept panic away and allowed him to take the situations at hand and even to do it with a dignity and strength that we still find astonishing.

But this was not just a heroic action- Paul was modeling and instructing us in how we are to behave. We can do it too if we follow his directions.

But there is another piece to this puzzle. When the situation overwhelms us it is good to know what our security is- it allows us to go to bed at night and take the rest God has provided.

But what gets us up the next morning?

#3. Know Your Assignment

What a treasure we have been given!

An eternal reward.

A present comfort and blessing.

This are God's gifts to His people and we can barely comprehend the magnitude of these treasures until we see brokenness in action. But it doesn't stop there. We have been given these gifts and we are to not to keep them to ourselves-

. . . and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19

That assignment kept Paul getting up in the morning after a day and night of taking hits. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation to a world that is in conflict at almost every level.

This past week Pakistan experienced the assassination of Benazer Bhutto and predictable the country erupts into violence. Why do people react to such things by going out and shooting others, by setting cars and busses on fire? I don't think that there is really an answer to that question- but it certainly is predictable.

This reaction demonstrates why the ministry of reconciliation is such an important one. At every level our world is desperately sad.

On Saturday the results of a Cdn happiness survey come out and the results were very interesting. The saddest city in Canada is its most beautiful and one of the richest, Victoria. Happiness is not a result of wealth and beauty and this funny little survey illustrates the deep need for genuine reconciliation.

We have been given that assignment and even as we work out how to respond to the challenges that come our way- as we turn the pages to the future- we must never forget the assignment that has been committed to us- the message of reconciliation.

But there is a very important reality check that goes alongside of another message that I have been passing on these past 2 weeks- it is a message that has been on our sign for a long time but one I have gone back to again and again-

BE WHAT GOD INTENDS YOU TO BE

DON'T PRETEND TO BE

WHAT YOU ARE NOT

God wants us to be heroic but according to His design for us- not out of some heroic image that we might invent for ourselves. The reality is that our heroic images of ourselves will probably just cause us more grief because they set us up for embarrassing failures.

So what is Paul's reality check?

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 2 Corinthians 4:7

#4. God Even Shines Through Our Failures- If We Let Him

To me that is one of the most encouraging verses in the Bible and rounds out many parts of the amazing gift God has given His people.

We have been given incomprehensible gift- the gift of reconciliation with God. This gift comes with an eternal view of the trials of life and it comes with a very practical view of the trials of life.

Along side of that gift we have been given the commission of spreading the message of reconciliation with God to a world that needs it just as desperately as we do.

What a heroic mission! But along with the heroicism comes a grim reality- we are not heroic.

Why would God use a leaky pail to deliver the medicine of His healing to the world? Why would He put that treasure into porous jars of clay?

Because He chose to is the simple answer- but having done so, we the clay jars are not to pretend we are anything else but at least let that healing treasure pour out of the cracks.