

Hebrews 10:19-24, Matthew 10:16-25

Don't Give Up!!!

Sunday September 11th, 2022

Don't give up! Don't give up! Don't ever give up! Today's message is on endurance, long suffering, or forbearance. And so, I want to tell you the story again about John. I met John when he was 101 years old. He was very thin and always dapperly dressed. On Sundays with some help, he would totter up the marble stairs of the Greek revival style church he was a member of, Kavanaugh UMC of Greenville Texas. This was the church I served in when I was going to Seminary.

John always sat in the front row right in front of the pulpit. John was blind and almost completely deaf, but he was always there in the front row until he was at least 104. He died at 105.

One day someone in the congregation asked him a rude question that gave John a chance to witness, a witness that I remember clearly to this day. This person asked John rather loudly, and you had to be loud in order for John to hear you. This man asked to John, "Why do you bother to come to worship? You can't see anything, and you can't hear anything?"

At that John stiffened up and stood as straight up as he could and said loudly so that I and everyone around him could hear. John said, "To show who's side I am on!"

This is rally Sunday where we have called the church back together again for worship and Sunday school and choirs to show whose side we are on.

This is a message, a call to hold on, to endure to the end, to suffer for Jesus and not give up!

Jesus promised we would suffer for him. He didn't ever say we "might" suffer for him, but he promised us that we would suffer for following him.

Sometimes from the State, sometimes from the Religious authorities and sometimes even our own family. Verse 22 contains that promise, "Jesus said, **"You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved."**

We are immersed in a secular world where convenience, pleasure and wealth are worshipped. Church and faith are denigrated, and the worst of every religion highlighted. All Muslims are tied to Jihad and 9/11. Roman Catholics, and by association all Christians, are tied to child abuse. Jews and Israel tied to the fight against Hamas and accused then, of apartheid.

The lie that is repeated enough that many believe it is that religion i.e. Christianity has killed more people than any other thing. The truth is that it is secular movements like fascism, socialism and communism murdered 100 million people in the last century.

As a Christian, try standing for Traditional Christian marriage, life, sobriety, and against gambling and see what happens. Jesus promised persecution.

So, it is a brave thing when you show up for worship. And against all this was added during the pandemic, if you show for worship, you will get the virus and die. Most of the lists of the "10 Places to avoid if you want to avoid the virus" include houses of worship.

Now people drifting away from the worship of God or fleeing in fear is nothing new. The book of Hebrews itself is sermon written to encourage people to not give up on their faith and meeting together for worship. Hebrews is a 13-chapter book written to encourage people to hold on and not give up!

In our Hebrews passage today “three reasons” are given not to give up! First, verses 19 and 20 remind us that Jesus’ blood and body brought us into the presence of God. Jesus’ death on the cross revealed that Jesus Christ’s Godhood had been veiled by his flesh. The death of his earthly body was then revealed in his resurrection and ascension to Heaven--the presence of God in Christ.

Second, Jesus now stands in the very presence of God interceding for us in front of the throne of heaven. We do not need an earthly priest to make sacrifices for us for our sin. That sacrifice has been made once and for all, and the sacrifice who is Jesus, is also our priest and advocate before God.

And third, his blood has washed us free from all our sin. As verse 22 says, “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”

And in order not to give up the writer of Hebrews gives us several practical “things to do” to hold onto our faith, to endure, to hang on.

First, he says to simply “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess for he who promised is faithful.” In our deepest, darkest moments when we are most challenged by life and the evil of this world if we turn to God in hope and faith---our hope will not be in vain.

In my years working with youth, several families lost children through disease and suicide. The families that eventually were able to survive in a healthy manner were the ones who held onto their faith no matter what.

Second, God has given us each other in order to not give up. God has given us the Fellowship of Christ and membership in the Family of God. We must make the decision to reach out to others and help them in this often, difficult journey of life and faith. “We need to consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”

Dr. Barclay wrote, “No one ever achieved personal salvation by devoting all their time and energy to that purpose; but many have saved their souls by being so concerned for others that they forgot that they had their own souls to save.”

The Covid pandemic very much damaged Vista Church and many local churches around this nation. In 2019 we brought in 30+ new members which was 10% of our membership. We were finishing our new Education and Administration building. We had 30+ in our children’s Sunday school program not including the youth. We invested 1.8 million dollars in that building for Sunday school rooms and another 40k in our nursery which is yet to be used because of Covid.

Today, through the summer our in-person worship is down 26% from Pre-Covid. Our children’s Sunday school is down to a handful and sometimes just 2 as it was 8 years ago when I arrived.

But the message today is Don’t Give Up! Endure! Hold On! **“Hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”** We have all the physical resources we need right here, right now to rebuild and regrow.

What we need is faith and commitment to do the work of God here. We need to spur one another towards love and good deeds and above all else not quit meeting together for the worship of God!! We need this rally Sunday to be the first of many Sunday rallies for the worship of God.

We as a church need to make Psalm 71:18 our rallying cry for our children and youth. **“Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.”** The truth is Vista Church has never been a “young family church” from the moment it started. I was informed it’s first year, which was 32 years ago this week, the average age was 78. Nancy Yob brought her two young boys here and those 2 were the Sunday Department. But this church has never abandoned or given up on the young people not then, and not today!

Covid has really changed parents and children. The kids and families are still around us, but we are trying to figure out how to help them and bring them into the fellowship of the Church. This is why we are meeting with as many of the parents as possible today after church while their children are entertained.

Between Valerie, Peggy Jo and myself we have about 100 years' experience working with children and youth, but honestly, in this post Covid world we can't quite figure out what to do, so we need your help.

First and most importantly would you pray for the children and their families and the families yet to come to call Vista Church their home?

Second, consider being a short-term Sunday school teacher or being on our Family Ministry Committee.

Third, keep coming up with ideas to encourage one another and don't ever get discouraged if a great idea is not immediately accepted.

40 some years ago I had a dream of building a Family Life Center at Kavanaugh UMC in Texas. That dream was drawn up by an architect and dropped and never pursued. Years later it was reborn at First UMC Mesa and I pursued that dream for 14 years before the Family Life Center at FUMC was completed. There is our timing and God's timing. Don't get discouraged. Don't give up!

Finally, don't let fear keep you from worship. Don't let fear of what other's think when you show up for worship. Don't let fear of Covid keep you away. During the height of Covid we had five different people on five different Sundays show up without any spread to anyone else.

Don't fear becoming involved in other people's lives and being disappointed. You will be. Even in me as I said a few weeks ago because we are all sinners. But as we seek to love one another, encourage one another you will be encouraged and grow in your faith.

I close with a quote from Rev. Levi Lusko's book "Through the Eyes of a Lion" which details the death of his daughter Lenya and the growth, love, and healing that came from that horrible event.

Rev. Levi wrote, 'What happens in God's house on Sunday is absolutely key to making it through (to next) Saturday.

Paul said, "It is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." 2 Cor. 4:6

There is something about the gathering of God's people that enables this glory to be experienced in a fuller way than is possible on your own.

As individuals, we are all a part of the Holy Habitation. When we come together, brick by brick, we are more the house of the Lord than when we are alone. His Spirit dwells there in power and he inhabits our praises. We gather so we can glow and then go.

These moments (of worship) are like little safe harbors, sanctuaries from pain. For those brief moments suffering isn't welcome and has no choice but to flee from the power of Jesus Christ. In his light we see light!

Rev. Lusko writes, "Jennie (his wife) and I have our spot where we worship at church. We stand there together for the singing, and then I usually get up to preach. We have shed more tears and received more strength there than maybe in any other place. I have looked to the floor and seen a puddle of tears at Jennie's feet more times than I can count. When I look up, her hands are raised, and she is locked into the glory of the Lord, taking heart, and renewing her courage.

My friend Carl Lentz told us, "It's better to win ugly than to lose pretty. **The secret is to keep showing up.**" There is real truth to that.

Don't quit! Scream if you need to scream, cry if you need to cry, but don't let go---because you are going to need what God wants to give you in worship."

So, my friends, life is hard. You're going to need God desperately at some point.

Fill your life now in worship with what you are going to need to hang on. Be here to receive what God wants to give you!

Don't give up!

Indeed, what is God saying to you and what are you going to do?

In Jesus name Amen!