

through to the future, if life is spent building some dream, then we will miss our lives in the same way we miss Flight 1214 to Chicago.

So the last word John has for his readers is not “Wait for the future”; it’s not “Here’s the date things will really shake up”; it’s “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.” By grace we see that now is the time to live forever in the presence of Jesus Christ. By grace we know that all the *chronos* activities — all the schedules and the deadlines and the routines — are only good if they’re part of something better. By grace we live in the present as if it means something for the future, as if how we live matters as much as what we do. By grace we are released from some rat race “out there” and so can value a friendship and have peace in seeming chaos. By grace we can smile at the ironies of life, even if there are more important things waiting for us. By grace we say with the Heidelberg Catechism, “My only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”

And so a life of grace is a life that says every day, “Come, Lord Jesus.” And a life of grace hears him say, “See, I am coming soon!” and knows that it’s true, because he’s been coming every day we’ve known him.

It’s a devastating question: “Can you miss your life?” But it’s a good one, because it’s so easy to get wrapped up in the visible. In some cases it’s especially true of Christians, because they’re so set on thinking that Christ’s return is a matter of chronology that they’re staring at the Gaza Strip and the new millennium and trying to get dates and places and times. But his coming isn’t a matter of chronology; it’s a matter of opportunity. It’s a matter of letting that future with him fill up the present and make a real difference at gas stations and family reunions and the times when tears are streaming down your face. That’s what John is after, that there will be enough grace in our lives to see the bigger picture, enough grace that we can rest in the quiet center of ourselves. John wants you to know that the kingdom of this world is becoming the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. He wants you to know that the coronation is coming, but you can live with the King even now. You can celebrate today. You can be part of the new Jerusalem even here.

So come, Lord Jesus. Keep on coming. And may your grace allow us to see it. Amen.



TITLE SERMON

— THIRTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME —

Where All Hope Lies

Text: Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Romans 5:1-11

This is a strange day, for all of us. Some of you may be unaware that today marks my return to this pulpit after seven months during which I’ve been dealing with a particularly aggressive and deadly form of cancer. Now, with the cancer vacationing for a little while, I am back, and glad for it. But this is a strange day, because I don’t really know what to say. I want to ignore the whole thing, pretend everybody’s forgotten that I was gone — and why I was gone — but we can’t do that.

We can’t ignore what’s been going on. We can rise above it; we can live through it; but we can’t ignore it. If we ignore the threat of death as too terrible to talk about, then the threat wins. Then we are overwhelmed by it, and our faith doesn’t apply to it. And then we have no hope.

We want to worship God in this church, and for our worship to be real it doesn't have to be guilt-ridden, or fun, or crowded; but it does have to be honest — honest about faith in a world of violence and pain, a world that decries faith and smashes hope and rebuts love. We must be honest that believing is not always easy and that life is hard.

So we must face the truth here, and the truth is that I was scared. Not of cancer, not really. Not even of death. Dying is another matter — how long it will take and how it may go. That still scares me. But when I say I was scared, it's not those fears that I'm talking about. This fear was something else altogether.

One man has influenced my preaching more than anyone else. His name is John Timmer, and he's a recently retired Christian Reformed minister in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In his working with a text and in his preaching, John Timmer showed me that a sermon that misses or ignores or disowns the scandal of the gospel is no sermon at all. And the scandal of the gospel is grace. The scandal of the gospel is that there is nothing you can do to be made right with God; but God has made himself right with you — through blood, through death. And it's amazing how a man could in one sense preach the same message week after week and still mold my life with what he said. John Timmer taught me that baptizing an infant reminds us that God comes to us before we go to him. John Timmer showed me that God came to Abraham when there was nothing to come to, an old man at a dead end. And that's how God always comes — to infants and old people, to sinners and losers. That is grace. And no sermon can be without it.

So I've tried to fill my sermons with it, faithfully and honestly and even courageously, but always with grace. And it's an amazing thing to do, to proclaim through the poetry and the stories and the letters of the Bible a plan of God that runs contrary to every instinct we have, to every principle of our world. And, you know, I believe it. I believe that God has come to Kevin, this infant baptized here today, long before Kevin can make a move toward him. I believe the words of John Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism and the New Testament that we have only one comfort, but it is a comfort in life and in death. I do believe that, but I was scared.

We've dealt with a lot of interesting and difficult topics the last three years — war and divorce and homosexuality, *and death*. And I said that the gospel speaks to every one of them — I said that God receives broken people all the time. But that was before I faced death myself.

This is a silly thing to admit. I don't know if I ever realized the absolutely shocking, radical idea that is God's grace. I said those things about

it fully believing them, but at the same time fully believing — or at least expecting — that I had a few decades yet before I really needed to count on them. I assumed that I had forty or fifty years yet, years in which I would earn my way, be a kind old man whose sin wasn't so significant anymore, who of course would be received by God because he was good to animals and picked up the mail for his neighbors. Like I say, it's silly thinking.

And scary. Because suddenly I wasn't looking at fifty years but five months, or seven months, probably not two years, almost certainly not more than that. My appointment was moved up — now I would meet my Judge not kind and old but *soon*, with not enough time to undo the wrong, not enough time to straighten out what's been crooked all these years, not enough time to prepare, to clean up. *That's* what I was scared of.

So, for the first time in my life, I had not only to preach this scandalous good news, not only to believe it, but to rest on it, to depend upon it, to stake my life on it. And as I faced all of this and was frightened by it, I remembered one of the simplest, most powerful statements in the entire Bible.

You may have thought that I chose this text because of those wonderful words about suffering producing endurance and endurance character and character hope. Those are beautiful words, true words, but I'm not so sure they apply to me; I'm not so sure I've suffered so much or so faithfully to claim that result. I hope so, but many of you easily outdistance me in those ways. Actually, what drew my attention to Romans 5 was not that beautiful paragraph, but just one little word: *et*. That's what brought comfort to my soul. *Eti* is a Greek word that means "yet" "still" — as in "while we *still* were sinners Christ died for us" (v. 8); or "while we were *still* weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (v. 6). What's interesting about verse 6 is that the word is used twice; it's repetitious and ungrammatical, but it's like an additional emphasis, an additional marveling at the glorious goodness of the gospel: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."

Kevin is weak right now — he's weak in language and intellect and faith. That's why his baptism is a wondrous act; it's a celebration of grace, a celebration of how, when he was still weak, God came to him before he could even know to go to God. I am weak, too — physically, of course, quite profoundly in some ways, but that's not my main weakness, my most debilitating weakness. And if I ever doubted that, it's been proven to me in this last half year. My weakness is more of the soul than of the body, and I've realized that as I've dwelled on thoughts like, "How will I explain myself to my God? How can I ever claim to have been what he called me to

be? I can't." That's the kind of weakness Paul's talking about. And that's where *eti* comes in — while we were *still* weak, while we were *still* sinners, while we were *still* enemies of God, we were brought together with him through the death of his Son.

I find it unfathomable that God's love propelled him to reach into our world with such scandalous grace, such a way out, such hope. Let me tell you, there's no hope anywhere else — I looked. There is no hope in this world apart from that scandal. It all lies right here.

You learn that when you face death and think about what it means. It means the same friends you enjoy now will still get together a year and three years and twenty years from now and you will almost never come up in the conversation. It means that your work will be gone — in my case, this church will call a new minister with new gifts and a new future — and you will soon be out of mind as you are out of sight. And don't feel too sorry about that — I would be the same way, I *am* the same way. Hope doesn't lie in your legacy; it doesn't lie in your longevity; and it doesn't lie in your personality or your career or your politics or your children or your goodness. It lies in *eti*.

When I was saying something like this a few months ago to a friend of mine, he reminded me of those poignant words of Psalm 103: "As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more." For the first time I felt those words in my gut; I understood that my place would know me no more.

One of my favorite recent poems — even before the cancer — is from Miller Williams. It's called "Adjusting to the Light." It's about that scene in John 11 in which Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. For the most part the words of the poem are spoken by Lazarus's friends and neighbors, after they are surprised to see that he really is back among them, back among the living, after four days of being gone. This is what they say:

Lazarus, listen, we have things to tell you.

We killed the sheep you meant to take to market.

We couldn't keep the old dog, either.

He minded you. The rest of us he barked at.

Rebecca, who cried two days, has given her hand

to the sandalmaker's son. Please understand

we didn't know that Jesus could do this.

We're glad you're back. But give us time to think.

Imagine our surprise. . . .

We want to say

we're sorry for all of that. And one thing more.

We threw away the lyre. But listen, we'll pay

whatever the sheep was worth. The dog, too.

And put your room the way it was before.²⁴

I love that line. Time goes on, whether we do or not. Miller Williams is right: Lazarus's place knew him no more. I *liked* that poem, but now I've *lived* that poem. And, believe me, don't put your hope in your legacy or your name recognition, in some sermon you wrote or project you accomplished. Even if it allows you to last a little longer, it won't matter, because in the end you'll still be swallowed up, and your place will remember you no more. The story of Lazarus being raised isn't really the story of Lazarus; it's the story of Jesus. Lazarus got a few more years and then he died all over again — he was resuscitated, not resurrected. The story of Lazarus makes for a good film, but it's not much to rest your entire existence on. But this isn't the story of Lazarus; it's the story of Jesus, the story of the one who gives life, even through his death, the story of the one who breathes the breath of God into utterly dead souls.

Our place will know us no more. It's true. All the stuff we think will keep us alive, when we really look at it, it only shows us how little we have to depend on, to stake our lives on, to put all our hopes in. All we really have is the scandalous gospel of grace, that while we were still weak and sinners and even enemies, Christ died for us.

My place will know me no more, but God knows me. The Giver of life, who came to me and kept coming to me before I ever went to him, knows me, and so I have hope, hope on which I can rest all that I am — hope that I believe Kevin will have some day, hope in the story of Jesus.

So don't be surprised that we won't talk about this cancer situation very often. This is not the story of me, it's the story of Jesus. And that story applies to every cancer, every job, every family, every divorce, every sin that belongs to any of us. But to us who believe, it's always Jesus' story, and Jesus' story carries beyond all of it.

I'm dying. Maybe it'll be longer instead of shorter; maybe I'll preach for several months instead of a few weeks. But I am dying. And it's hard and I hate it and I'm frightened by it. But there is hope, an unshakable hope.

²⁴ Reprinted from *Adjusting to the Light: Poems* by Miller Williams, by permission of the University of Missouri Press. Copyright © 1992 by Miller Williams.

That hope is not in something I've done, some purity I've kept, or some sermon I've written. I hope in God, the scandalous God with a plan the world has never heard of — reaching out for an enemy, saving a sinner, dying for the weak. And that I can stake my life on. I must. And so must you.

SERMONS FOR VARIOUS OCCASIONS

2