

James 4:13-15; Hebrews 11:1-3; 2 Corinthians 4:16 - 5:10

October 21, 2018

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**STEP UP. STEP OUT.
GOD'S PLEDGE**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Typically on Thursday mornings, I arrive at the church, walk into Cheryl's office, and ask her to take messages for me. "I'm going to try to write my sermon," I tell her. By Thursday morning, I hope to have completed my sermon preparation so I am ready to write my sermon. This past Thursday, however, was different. Instead of arriving at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, I arrived at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Although I spent my high school and college years at Peachtree Church and was a candidate for ministry under the care of the session, I had not been to Peachtree in many years. I was overwhelmed by the feelings and emotions I experienced as I walked into the sanctuary.

I was at Peachtree Church to attend the memorial service for Blucher Cooper, my best friend's father. Butch had asked if I would like to help lead the service, but I declined. I told him I would rather attend and pay my respects to Mr. Cooper as a member of the congregation. Butch and his sisters, Margaret and Liz, all good friends of mine for many years, asked me to sit with the family. As we walked into the sanctuary at 1:00 p.m. and took our seats in the pews, little did I know I would find myself doing some sermon preparation.

One of the former pastors of the church and a good friend of Mr. Cooper's opened the service with some scripture sentences from various psalms. Then we stood and sang "It Is Well With My Soul." After we sat down, Rev. Barber invited us to join him in the unison prayer printed in the bulletin. As we prayed, I realized we were using some of the words and ideas from this morning's sermon text from 2 Corinthians 4:16 – 5:10. Together we prayed, "Eternal God, We praise You for the great company of all those who have finished their course in faith and now rest from their labor. We praise You for those dear to us whom we name in our hearts before You. Especially we praise you for Blucher whom You have graciously received into Your presence. To all of these, grant Your peace. Let perpetual light shine upon them; and **help us so to believe where we have not seen**, that Your presence may lead us through our years, and bring us at last with them into **the joy of Your home, not made with hands but eternal in the heavens**; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

All of a sudden, the words of scripture that had been rattling around in my brain on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday as I thought about today's sermon became very alive, very real, very applicable.

After we prayed the unison prayer, Rev. Barber read Psalm 23, we sang "Blessed Assurance," and the other minister, Rev. Franch, read selections from John 14 and Philippians 4. The next thing listed in the Order of Worship was "Memorial Remarks."

Rev. Barber stood up and, as he began his remarks about Mr. Cooper, he said, “As I was thinking about what to say today, a particular scripture passage came to mind.” Then he began reading 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, which we just heard a few minutes ago. It was as if time stopped and God’s Word was speaking directly to me. John Wesley talked about his heart being “strangely warmed” as he heard God’s Word read in a meeting at Aldersgate. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus said, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That’s how I felt Thursday afternoon. The words on the page became the living Word of God in that place, at that time.

Rev. Barber talked about Paul’s encouraging words, “So we are always confident: even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith and not by sight,” and he made the connection to Mr. Cooper “going home” to be with the Lord. This is a most appropriate scripture to read at a funeral or memorial service. I have used Paul’s words many times in such situations, especially at the graveside. I imagine Paul’s words brought great comfort to Margaret, Butch, and Liz, and to the rest of Mr. Cooper’s family and friends, for he was a man of great faith who made it his aim to please the Lord.

But as I sat there and listened to Rev. Barber talk about 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 and Mr. Cooper’s homecoming, I was very aware of all of the living people in the sanctuary who were hearing God’s Word. And I found myself thinking about standing up here this morning preaching from 2 Corinthians 4:16 – 5:10, not at a funeral or memorial service, but in a regular Sunday morning worship service. There’s never been any question in my mind that Paul’s words are most fitting to read at the time of death. Thursday afternoon, in the midst of a memorial service, I was suddenly very aware of how meaningful Paul’s words are for us who are living, who seek to walk in the way of the Lord – “for we walk by faith, not by sight.”

We have three epistle lessons this morning. That’s a bit unusual, but all three talk about walking by faith, not by sight. James says, “You do not even know what tomorrow will bring . . . You ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’” (James 4:14-15) Hebrews says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Paul roots our confidence in living, not in our own abilities and accomplishments or knowledge, but in our walk of faith. Ultimately, God’s promise for the future applies to the hope we have of the resurrection to eternal life. That’s why these words from 2 Corinthians 5 are so often read at the graveside. But that very same hope is what sustains us in the living of these days, since we do not even know what tomorrow will bring.

Early last week, I received a note from someone whose house got flooded out. It has now been emptied and gutted, as have so many more houses. I asked her if I could share a couple of phrases from the note in today’s sermon, and she said, “Be my guest.” She wrote, “This has been an unbelievable journey . . . here today and gone tomorrow! I know God has a plan for us . . . will be patient and wait! In the meantime prayers are appreciated.”

That phrase – “here today and gone tomorrow!” – caught my attention. In a way, that phrase is a pretty good paraphrase of what the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about this life and the life to come. Paul wrote, “So we do not lose heart.

Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. . . we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. . . For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (2 Corinthians 4:16, 18, 5:1)

As we have seen first-hand in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence and in pictures from Florida after Hurricane Michael, “Here today and gone tomorrow!” is all too real for many of our neighbors. We know very vividly – either personally or vicariously – how quickly and easily the things in our lives can come and go. That’s why Paul talks about walking by faith and not by sight, and looking at what cannot be seen, what is eternal. And when we put too much trust in what can be seen, or when what can be seen is suddenly and drastically taken away from us, our remaining hope, our sure hope is in the promise of God. As Paul puts it (for this life and the life beyond), “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.”

You’ll notice the margin note in today’s bulletin next to the offering is taken from the 21st century King James Version. I like how it says, “God hath given unto us the **pledge** of the Spirit.” That word “pledge” or “guarantee” is an act of good faith. It has its roots in the financial world. It’s earnest money. It’s a down payment. It’s a promise made in good faith. Interestingly, the biblical Greek word for “pledge, guarantee” is now used in modern Greek to mean “engagement ring.” But isn’t that appropriate, since an engagement ring is a promise, a pledge, a guarantee of the commitment and devotion and way of life that is yet to come?

Last fall we tried something different during our fall Stewardship emphasis. On Pledge Dedication Sunday, you were asked to write down an amount of money on a piece of paper, put that paper in an envelope, seal it, and address the envelope to yourself. Then you were invited to come forward and put your envelope on the communion table as an act of dedication and faith. No one has opened the envelopes since last fall. In the next few weeks, you should receive your envelope in the mail. This is intended to be a spiritual exercise – to think during the year about the commitments we all made and to take stock of where we are with that commitment when we open the envelopes and look at what we wrote a year ago.

In a sense, the session last year wanted to help us think very concretely about what it means to “walk by faith and not by sight.” A year ago, none of us on the session or in the congregation had any idea what we would be facing in our community this fall, in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence. Obviously, many if not most or all of us will open our envelopes and read what we wrote down last fall in much different circumstances. For some people, it really is a matter of “here today and gone tomorrow.” For others of us who didn’t lose the things of our lives that can be seen, we will read what we wrote as we wonder how best to help our friends and neighbors.

At the session meeting Tuesday night, your elders and I had a good conversation about how to talk about stewardship in light of what has happened in our church and community in Hurricane Florence. There was much wisdom and compassion and good guidance shared around the table. We agreed as a session to name the situation for what it is – a difficult time facing all of us. But we also believe and trust that as

individuals and as a church, we don't face this difficult time and these challenging days ahead on our own. We want to walk by faith, not by sight. We want to put our trust in God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee, as a pledge.

Perhaps you've heard the saying, "Don't be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good!" Some people don't like that phrase. They think it means we're not supposed to think about heaven or God or spiritual matters. I don't think that's what it means at all. In fact, I think it's a fair warning against ignoring the realities of this earthly life – especially when times are hard and much is asked of us. It's kind of like what the book of James says, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" (James 2:15-16)

God has created us to live in this earthly world, calls us to walk by faith and not by sight, summons us to walk in the way of Jesus our Lord, and blesses us with gifts and resources to use in his service and to help others. Maybe we can tweak that phrase a bit to say, "Be so heavenly minded that you can be and do earthly good."

Nineteen years ago, right about this time of year, I ran into Virginia Troy, Ann Carter's mother, in the meat department at Food Lion. We were talking about the overwhelming needs all around us in the aftermath of the flooding following Hurricane Floyd. We talked about how easy it is to feel hopeless or useless. Then Virginia looked me in the eye and she said, "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days, for the living of these days."

That is our prayer again today. We have God's sure pledge and guarantee of God's Holy Spirit. Yes, of course we rejoice that the pledge gives us assurance of an eternal home, not made by human hands. Yes, of course we find comfort from that pledge when we gather for a memorial service or stand at the graveside.

But, we can take comfort and courage in this life, also. In the coming weeks, as we open our envelopes and read what we wrote to God and to ourselves a year ago, and as we think about what we can pledge in the coming year for the work and mission and outreach of the Wallace Presbyterian Church, we will do so mindful of the great challenges before us, but also the great opportunities before us, and the blessings God provides for the work he calls us to do.

And we know that we have God's sure pledge for the living of these days, even when things are here today and gone tomorrow.

Let us pray: Lord, your Word tells us faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and so in faith and with assurance we strive to be your faithful people. We hope in you, a generous God who meets our needs. We hope in you, a creative God who multiplies our gifts. We hope in you, a mysterious God who invites us to kingdom living. God of grace, accept us in your service. Amen