

**Old Testament Lesson and Hymn #59**  
**Psalm 105 (selected verses) and**  
**Steadfast Love of the Lord**

**Hymn #59 The**

**Refrain: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning, new every morning; great is your faithfulness, O Lord, great is your faithfulness.**

**Epistle Lesson: 2 Timothy 2:8-15**

**September 4, 2016**

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

**Words to Live By in Times Such as These**  
**GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS**

**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.**

About seven hours ago, Rome time, Pope Francis began a Mass of Canonization for Blessed Teresa of Kolkata. Following a number of events, including a “family feast” for the poor, a musical about the life of Mother Teresa, other Masses, and prayer vigils, during today’s morning Mass in St. Peter’s Square, Pope Francis declared Blessed Teresa of Kolkata a saint.

Mother Teresa was known around the world for her work among the most desperately poor in India. Her initial call to India was as a teacher. However, she talked of hearing “the Voice” which called her to help the poor while living among them, and of having a profound sense of God’s presence. She founded the Missionaries of Charity, who built orphanages, nursing homes for people with leprosy, and hospice centers for the terminally ill. She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

Mother Teresa was revered for her devotion to the poor and her acts of charity that apparently demonstrated a deep faith in God. However, after her death, researchers, including a priest who oversaw her cause for sainthood, discovered numerous letters in which Mother Teresa talked about her spiritual isolation and struggle throughout the last fifty years of her life. In 1959 she wrote, “In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me – of God not being God – of God not existing.” In a letter from 1961, she wrote, “Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason – the place of God in my soul is blank. There is no God in me – when the pain of longing is so great, I just long and long for God. The torture and pain I can’t explain.”

In an NPR interview this week, Rev. James Martin, a Catholic priest who has written about his own spiritual journey in a book called *My Life With the Saints*, said that Mother Teresa dealt with her “dark night of the soul” by saying, “Even though I

don't feel you, I believe in you." He said that statement of faith makes her example relevant and meaningful to contemporary Christians who also struggle with doubt. Rev. Martin said, "Ironically, this most traditional saint becomes a saint for modern times."<sup>1</sup>

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

If you were in worship here last Sunday, you may remember singing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" as our first hymn. Originally I had selected Hymn #45, "I to the Hills Will Lift My Eyes," based on Psalm 121 as today's opening hymn. However, on Wednesday I texted Vera and Karla and told them I wanted to change the first hymn to "A Mighty Fortress" because the hymn and especially the story behind the hymn fit well with today's sermon.

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" became known as the anthem of the Protestant Reformation. It is probably the most famous of Martin Luther's thirty-six hymns, which he wrote to be professions of faith. Our opening hymn today is based on Psalm 46, which begins, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

And it was a time of trouble for Martin Luther in 1527, ten years after he nailed his ninety-five theses to the castle door at Wittenberg. On April 22 of that year, Luther suffered such a severe dizzy spell while he was preaching, he had to quit in the middle of his sermon. For ten years he had been in the midst of theological and political controversies. Not only did he battle with the Catholic Church, he also battled with other reformers about the correct understanding of the Lord's Supper. At times his life was in danger. He became very depressed.

On July 6 of that year, some friends came to Luther's house for dinner. He felt an intense buzzing in his left ear. After he lay down on his bed, he called out, "Water . . . or I'll die!" He became very cold and thought he was about to die. However, he was able to regain some strength, only to be plunged into illness and depression again in August, September, and December. Later he wrote his good friend and fellow reformer Philip Melancthon, "I spent more than a week in death and hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God. But through the prayers of the saints [my friends], God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below."

In August, Wittenberg was struck by the plague. Many of the townspeople fled in fear, but Luther stayed behind and cared for the sick. He transformed his house into a hospital, even though his wife was pregnant. Many of Luther's friends died. His own son became ill with the plague. Things did not improve until late November.

During that year, Luther reflected on the troubles in his life and said, "The only comfort against raging Satan is that we have God's Word to save the souls of believers." At some point during that difficult year of 1527, Luther wrote his famous hymn, in which he affirms, "And though this world with devils filled Should threaten to undo us, We will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us. The prince of

darkness grim? We tremble not for him. His rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure. One little Word shall fell him.”<sup>2</sup>

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic and Catholic priest, St. John of the Cross, wrote about “the dark night of the soul.” This has been described as “the feeling of spiritual emptiness or being abandoned by God.” The best illustration of “the dark night of the soul” may be our Lord himself, who cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” But “the dark night of the soul” is understood by many people to be an inevitable and necessary part of the spiritual journey to God. It can vary in duration. It can have different causes. It can tempt us to question our faith. When you are going through your own “dark night of the soul,” you may cry out like the desperate father whose son had the unclean spirit, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

Those dark nights come to all of us. They may pass quickly, or they may seem endless. But we put our faith in the God who is always there, even when we deny him, even if we are faithless. When Jesus was on trial for his life, Peter denied him and the rest of his disciples abandoned him at the cross. Still, the risen Jesus reconciled Peter to himself and commissioned him to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. When the eleven disciples met the risen Lord on the mountain in Galilee, they worshiped him, but some doubted. Still, Jesus commissioned **all of them** to continue his ministry and work. John Chrysostom, the 4<sup>th</sup> century Bishop of Constantinople, said, “He is faithful and unshaken, whether we say so or not. He abides the same, whether we deny him or not.”

When Paul wrote to Timothy, his younger companion in ministry and his “child in the faith,” he encouraged him to “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David.” This is the core of the gospel. This is the foundation of our faith. Jesus Christ is our hope and the sure sign of God’s faithfulness to us.

I am something of a crossword puzzle fanatic. I love to work the two daily puzzles in the *Wilmington Star News*, and especially the New York Times Sunday puzzle. So, I was intrigued by a comment I read this week. In a commentary on Paul’s advice to Timothy to “remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David,” one writer said, “[This is] like the answer to 1-across and 1-down in the great crossword puzzle of life.”<sup>3</sup> If you can fill in 1-across and 1-down, you have a good start on the puzzle. However, there are still plenty of clues you have to figure out and blanks you have to fill in before the puzzle is finished, but 1-across and 1-down give you a strong foundation.

Another writer puts it this way: “We do know temptations to faithlessness and we do waver in our loyalties to the gospel and the Christian life. There are indeed forces in the world that are resistant to the gospel and inhospitable to the Christian life. To these forces, to these temptations, the story of Jesus still speaks. In the midst of hardship, we can still ‘remember Jesus Christ.’” Or, as Martin Luther put it in his song, “Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing, Were not the right man on our side, the man of God’s own choosing. Let goods and kindred go, this

mortal life also; the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still; His Kingdom is forever."

"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David." Not only do we find our hope in God's faithfulness in Jesus Christ, we also hear the clarion call for our Christian lives. We get distracted in life, we get overwhelmed in life. And it's no different in the church. We get distracted in our life together in the church and we can get overwhelmed in the church – and we forget Jesus Christ, we forget what our most important mission is. As Paul says, "We wrangle over words," and we get caught up in things that sap our energy and enthusiasm. We forget what is central.

Remember Jesus Christ – and in our remembering of Jesus Christ, we remember God's fidelity and faithfulness to his promises. A doctrine of Presbyterian and Reformed theology called "the perseverance of the saints" expresses this trust in God's faithfulness and fidelity to his people and promises. Despite what the doctrine is called, it's not really about what **we** do as believers as much as it is all about what **God** has done, is doing, and will do in our lives and in the world. The doctrine expresses "the conviction that the purposes to which we have committed our lives are undergirded by the ultimate power in the universe."

The noted 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, said it this way: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love."<sup>4</sup>

How could we come to worship this morning and hear about FAITHFULNESS and not sing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"? Many of the great hymns of the church were written in times of challenge and struggle and personal hardship, such as our opening hymn today. Those background stories can make the hymns that much more meaningful.

What makes the story behind "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" so interesting is, it wasn't written out of a particular "dark night of the soul." The hymn's author, Thomas Chisholm, was born in a log cabin in 1866. He became a believer at the age of 27 and felt called to the ministry. He had no college or seminary training, but was ordained into the United Methodist Church at the age of 37. He served a church for one year, but because of his persistent bad health, he had to quit. He moved to New Jersey and became an insurance agent.

Chisholm wrote hundreds of poems. His favorite scripture verses were Lamentations 3:22-23: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Chisholm wrote a poem about those verses and sent it to his friend, William Runyan. Runyan was so moved by the poem, he set it to music. Later, Runyan shared the hymn with his friend, Dr. Will Houghton, president of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. The song became the unofficial theme song of the institute. Dr. Houghton asked a then unknown singer named George Beverly Shea to sing on the institute's radio program,

and Shea included the hymn. Billy Graham heard George Beverly Shea singing on the radio and invited him to sing at his preaching crusades. The hymn became famous and beloved around the world because of the Billy Graham crusades.

When Thomas Chisholm was seventy-five, he wrote in a letter: “My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.” Chisholm often described himself as “just an old shoe.” One person described the famous hymn as “just the fruit of a faithful man with a simple faith in a faithful God.”<sup>5</sup>

Friends, whether you are going through your own “dark night of the soul” or you are distracted from what is central or circumstances tempt you to cry out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” or you find yourself denying Jesus Christ by what you do and don’t do as one of his followers, remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David.

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

***Let us pray: by Rev. Howard Carter, minister at St. Peter’s Presbyterian Church in Auckland, New Zealand***

Eternal God,  
who holds our times in your hand,  
who made us in your image,  
who while we were yet sinners sent Jesus Christ to live among us  
and die on the cross to free us from sin and death,  
who when Jesus rose and ascended to heaven sent your Spirit to be our counselor and comforter,  
we proclaim your faithfulness  
and thank you for your steadfast love.

Faithful God,  
we look back and remember and thank you for all you’ve done in the past.  
You knitted us together in our mother’s womb.  
You have guided our steps all our lives,  
always calling us to come and follow Jesus.  
You have met with us and saved us.  
You walk through the sunny days and deep dark shadows that make up our lives.  
You empower us to live, love, and witness to you.  
We thank you for the people who have inspired us and helped us grow in you.  
We thank you for the people you have led us to serve and love.

Living God,  
we thank you for your presence and work in our lives today.  
It's not just in the past.  
Today we are made new because of what you have done for us.  
Today you are teaching and leading us.  
You are calling us to be closer and closer to you.  
You are calling us to maturity in Christ Jesus.  
You strengthen us and encourage us.  
You invite us to seek justice, care, and witness to you.

God who is Alpha and Omega, beginning and end,  
you have our future in your hands,  
our tomorrow with all its potential,  
our next step, our next sunrise and sunset .  
You will lead us all our days.  
As you work your plans out in our lives,  
as you call us to continue to grow and to serve,  
you have our eternity in your hands,  
that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

You have been faithful in the past and you are faithful today  
and you never change so we trust you with our future.

Forgive us for our sins.  
Fill us afresh with your Spirit.  
Equip us to serve you faithfully into the future,  
to proclaim and live the good news of Jesus Christ with holy boldness,  
to the glory of our eternal God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This information about Mother Teresa's canonization is taken from three sources:  
James Martin, "A Saint's Dark Night," *The New York Times*, August 29, 2007 at  
[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

Shona Crabtree, "Book Uncovers a Lonely, Spiritually Desolate Mother Teresa," *Christianity Today*, August 30, 2007 at [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com).

NPR interview with Tom Gjelten, "How the Catholic Church Documented Mother Teresa's 2 Miracles," August 31, 2016 at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

<sup>2</sup>Information about Luther's hymn is taken from these sources:

C. Michael Hawn, "History of Hymns: 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God,'" Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church at [www.umcdiscipleship.org](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org).

Mark Galli, "The Weak Man Behind a Mighty Fortress," *Christianity Today* at  
[www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com).

<sup>3</sup>J. Peter Holmes, “2 Timothy 2:8-15: Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, Season After Pentecost 2*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 159.

<sup>4</sup>Information about the doctrine and Niebuhr’s quote are taken from John H. Leith, “The Perseverance of the Saints: What Is It?” preached at First Presbyterian Church, Auburn, AL, in *Pilgrimage of a Presbyterian: Collected Shorter Writings* by John H. Leith, edited by Charles E. Raynal (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>Information about the hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” is taken from these sources:  
Bob Kauflin, “A Hymn for Ordinary Christians – Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” at *Worship Matters: Resources for Music, Worship, & More from Bob Kauflin*, August 3, 2009 at [www.worshipmatters.com](http://www.worshipmatters.com).

Connie Ruth Christiansen, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness, The Song and Its Story. Composer Thomas Chisholm Writes Great is Thy Faithfulness,” at [www.sharefaith.com](http://www.sharefaith.com).