

Psalm 103**2 Timothy 4:1-13, 21-22**

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brothers and sisters. The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.

I didn't know it at the time, but one of the most important phone calls in my ministry came in 1996, 27 years ago. I was asked to volunteer as a spiritual advisor to a hospice program that was starting in our town of Moberly. Up until that time I thought Hospice was a place you could go when you were dying. I learned that hospice was also an organized system of helping patients and families with their physical, social, and spiritual needs in their home when a physician has told a patient that their disease would normally cause death within 6 months. Patients aren't told when they are going to die, but they are told that there is nothing more that can be done to cure them, that the disease is terminal, and they are invited to receive the caring of hospice during whatever time they have left to live.

That first year as a volunteer, I would meet with the hospice team to talk about meeting the needs of patients and families at the end life. I would visit a few families if they requested it, but mostly I would contact their pastor or a pastor from their denomination if they were new to town and support the pastor in providing spiritual care.

Over time I was drawn more and more into making visits myself as a chaplain in addition to the visits their own pastor would make. I saw the need for a chaplain as well as a family's own pastor as I saw how helpful the hospice chaplain that visited our members on hospice was to me, to the patient, and to the family. Later that year, I met with the Session and the congregation to change my call so that I would spend time each week working as a hospice chaplain and the church would be reimbursed for my time away from them.

For 8 years, my call as a hospice chaplain allowed me to minister to individuals and families that I never would have met otherwise. I traveled to towns up to 30 miles away, to farms, homes, apartments, nursing homes. I saw people of different beliefs and backgrounds, some very active in a religious community, some on the fringes, and some who have sensed no spiritual support in the past.

I gave a lot to patients and their families in trying to find out how they need to live the days they have left, what they want to and need to accomplish before their time runs out, what spiritual resources bring

them comfort, strength, peace, and hope when they are at their weakest and most helpless. I learned to ask the question, "Given your current limitations, how do you want to live until you die?" I even learned to ask that question to myself every day.

I have received so much more than I gave. I have been invited to witness miracles... to see God at work in people's lives in remarkable ways. To see the miracle of forgiveness acted out and experienced after many years of pain, to see trust and hope in God's love carry people through incredible suffering with strength and dignity. To learn so much about life and living from those who are dying. I became authentically close to patients in a brief time. I have learned from those I have grown so close to that it is only in facing death that we truly learn to live.

I also learned the difference between healing and curing.

Before my hospice work, I would read Psalm 103 that was our call to worship today in a very narrow way: Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits-- who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.... "who heals all your diseases". I would only think of healing as curing or removing our diseases or the problems that we face. I was a product of our society that seeks pills or avoidance or cures for every problem, disease, obstacle, painful situation we face. Thus we look to God to remove our problems or cure our diseases.

But I have learned that God's healing is much more profound than that. For the hospice patient doesn't look for a cure; there is nothing that medicine can do to cure their disease. However there are profound moments of healing that the terminally ill can experience. God can heal all our diseases. And I have seen the miracle of God's healing love that doesn't remove problems, but does give healing, hope and strength in the midst of suffering.

I have seen adult children coming to the terminally ill, caring for them, sharing with them, crying with them, holding them; profound healing of wounded relationships has taken place at many of those encounters. The terminally ill often see their spouses conveying love in the strongest way they have conveyed it and deep healing takes place out of that love. One caregiver said to me, "Being a caregiver is the most meaningful and the most difficult thing I have ever done in life." I have yet to hear a better description because it is both - difficult and meaningful.

The terminally ill and their loved ones make great discoveries about what is really important in this world, what really matters when all else is gone, what life is all about; healing occurs as a result of those discoveries. The terminally ill can see their faith climb to new heights never before reached. They allow God to touch their lives as never before and they experience the miracle of profound faith as true and ultimate healing takes place.

The healing of God does not mean that the problems are erased or removed; the healing of God helps us to be open to our problems, to face them, and to realize that there is meaning in the midst of suffering. And that healing in the midst of suffering is not limited to facing death; it is also healing in the midst of the suffering of a job loss, a move, a divorce, a physical handicap, a depression, an addiction, a mental illness, profound grief. In the midst of facing our wounds, rather than hiding or ignoring or running away from our wounds, God's healing takes place.

For in all of life, there is much pain and suffering that can not be eliminated. Finding healing in things that can't be cured, finding healing in the midst of pain and suffering is finding the miracle of God working in our lives.

When the religious leaders complain that Jesus' disciples don't fast like John's disciples.

Jesus responds, "Why should they fast while I am with them?" Do wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is there? No. They feast and celebrate.

The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. We all grieve over a loss. We grieve when someone is taken away from us. We are called to celebrate and rejoice at the loving relationships we have while someone is here, and we are called to grieve when our loved ones are taken away.

Each of us grieves in our own way over a loss and different losses affect us in different ways. Our grief is universal and it is personal; we all experience losses and we all experience grief, and we grieve in our own individual ways.

Let me tell you about two people who have taught me about the spectrum of grief. They were in another hospice program and the author, Doug Smith, had permission to share this story.

In 1990, Frank and Betty were 91 and 89 years old. They had celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary. They had had no children other than a stillborn child in 1923. They named that stillborn baby "Sarah" and the two of them had lived the rest of their lives together.

Frank became very ill with cancer and was admitted to a hospice program. Betty was determined to take care of Frank as long as she could. She had been taking care of him for 70 years and she didn't want someone else doing it at the end.

However, that resolve became very difficult; the demanding tasks of taking care of someone who was dying were too much for an 89 year old. She didn't want him in a hospital or a nursing home, but she was willing to move him into a room at a hospice house.

They lived together in that room for 16 days - Betty sleeping in a lounge chair or sometimes in Frank's bed. The hospice staff could help her when she needed it.

One morning at 5:30 a.m. a nurse was making her rounds when she looked into Frank and Betty's room. She saw Betty lying in the bed with Frank. She walked over towards them. She saw that Betty was awake, holding Frank's hand, watching the sun come up through the window. The nurse also saw that Frank was not breathing.

Betty turned to the nurse and said, "Frank asked me to join him in bed. He then asked me if it was okay for him to leave me and go to be with our daughter, Sarah. I said it was okay, but I miss him already." Betty then turned back toward the window.

We grieve for those we have grown close to. We grieve for those who have died 70 years ago and those who have died 7 minutes ago. We grieve for those we have known forever and those we have known only a short time. We grieve for a stillborn child who died prematurely and those for whom death was almost overdue. Our grief is universal and very personal.

A third lesson I have learned from the dying is the importance of living and acting today

"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may... Carpe Diem... Seize the day." We don't know what time we have left in our own lives or in the lives of those we care about. We can choose to live our lives in light of that fact or we can avoid and ignore it in all kinds of destructive ways. I was the caregiver for my brother who was a hospice patient at the age of 52 with stomach cancer. My brother said, "I know I'm going to die soon, but I don't want to be dying from now on; I want to live until that moment when I die." We put on my brother's tombstone "he said YES to life."

The Apostle Paul teaches us that lesson as he was facing his own death; it's a lesson that tells us to take the opportunity to show our love to others in concrete ways today because time is always running out. 2nd Timothy is said to be the last letter attributed to Paul, set during his last imprisonment in Rome when we was chained to a jail cell wall. It was written to the young disciple Timothy teaching him and encouraging him to proclaim the message of the salvation of Jesus Christ.

Paul shares with Timothy that his imprisonment means that he will die soon. "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I

have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. Do your best to come to me soon...”

The writer tells about some of the others who are no longer with him and why he wants Timothy to come to him and comfort him so badly. He encourages young Timothy to bring Mark with him along with the books and parchments that are the works of his life of faith and have so much meaning for him as he faces the end of his life. What meaningful items would you want a young friend to bring to you at the end of your life?

Then Paul closes this last letter with words that should haunt us and inspire us to action. “Do your best to come before winter.” Come before winter. Come before winter.

We don’t know if Timothy came before winter or not; we don’t know if he ever saw Paul again. What we do know is this: that winter, Paul died. Come before winter.

All of us are dying, and all of us are living until we die. There is a time limit on all our relationships. Knowing that our time with those we love is limited can invite us and inspire us to speak and show our love before it’s too late. Come before winter.

A friend of mine had a brother that he wanted to get to know better; they had never been close as children. When the brother started college, my friend decided to set a date that fall to go on a camping trip and spend a few days together, just the two of them, to try to become the brothers they wanted to be to each other. But the fall sped by and Christmas came. The next year in September my friend decided to try again for the same camping trip only to have the busyness of life interfere with his plans. So in January when he got a new year’s calendar, he wrote on September 1st, call George and set a date for the camping trip in October. He never did. George died in an automobile wreck that July. My friend has that September calendar with the 1st circled framed on his desk as a reminder to do the important things in life today. Come before winter.

People need to hear five things from us before they die. I forgive you. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you. Goodbye. Who needs to hear any of those five things from you right now? To whom would you be sorry you didn’t say “I forgive you Please forgive me Thank you I love you or Goodbye” if suddenly you were not given a chance to say it? Maybe it’s a friend, maybe it’s a spouse, maybe it’s a child, maybe it’s a parent. How long will you wait? Come before winter.

There are people in every church community who need us to come before winter, to share with them our memories, our gratitude, and our love, to receive our comfort, our support, our prayers, our love.

Some you know are facing ongoing problems that don’t have a cure. Loss of vision or hearing, unable to live in their own home, grief over the death of a loved one, dramatic changes in life, illness of body or spirit. How can you walk beside them in looking for healing and meaning and strength and hope in the midst of suffering that can’t be removed? What can you do? Come before winter.

What about your relationship to God? Do you need to say “I forgive you.” “Please forgive me.” “Thank you.” “I love you” to God? Come before winter.

Come before winter. Those words haunt me; those words inspire me. They haunt me with the realization that there is an end to every opportunity. They inspire me with the realization that I can respond to my limits by acting today. Given your current circumstances, your opportunities and limitations, how do you want to live your life until you die? Do your best to come before winter. The Lord be with your spirit; grace be with you. Amen.