

Perseverance: in Heart and Mind

Hebrews 12:1

Phil 4:3-8

Isaiah 26:3

For the next four Sundays, we'll be preaching a short sermon series on perseverance. Perseverance. This is another strong thread that runs through the Bible, and it's a word that's been on my mind lately, because perseverance is something that you and I and all of God's people are called to exercise as a regular part of our faith, and, it's something we are going to need especially for the next several months, at least. Because...

This has potential to be a tough fall and winter, for a number of reasons that include the usual Pacific Northwest gray skies and rain and shorter days, but this year also includes coronavirus, politics, and continued physical distancing, which means more indoor time which has the potential to lead to a feeling of isolation and depression for many people. Our traditional holiday celebrations are probably going to be different this year, at home and at church.

Therefore, keeping our mental and emotional and spiritual and physical and relational health is important. This is true at any time, but this year more than ever, we have to be planful and intentional about it. And now is a really good time to begin thinking about that, and preparing ourselves. Hence, a series on perseverance.

As Sheri Teesdale said, in her excellent sermon from mid-July, “This pandemic has been an especially difficult time for people who suffer from mental illness. Many of the usual support networks used to help us deal with life in the world feel distant. Routine is disrupted, sleep is disrupted, stress increases, normal life events take on new importance, and suddenly, maintaining stability becomes a full-time job.” And this can be magnified in colder, darker days.

Back in May I showed you a chart of what is called the “phases of collective trauma response” and it described the 4 phases: Heroic phase, disillusionment phase, rebuilding and restoring phase, then wiser living phase, or, the new normal.

The state of Washington, with the help of social workers and mental health professionals, issued an updated version of it, with slightly different names for the phases along with some additional information (it’s on our website under ‘resources’). I want us to notice: we are still in the disillusionment phase. So, we need to persevere. I hope that doesn’t disappoint or depress anyone! I hope it actually helps us find where we are in this, together, and give voice and name to that place. So we can persevere from *here*, knowing that things will get better in time.

Now let me be clear, this is not to say that if you *don't* get depressed this winter then something is wrong with you! Like, being happy is an indicator that you have a problem, or that you're clearly in denial or whatever. Many of us will winter this storm just fine. And if that is you, I have something to say to you: we need you. Your calling is to steward your good state of mind and heart and energy to help others, in whatever way you can; ***we need you***. Because there will be many who struggle this fall and winter, and your presence and personal peace will minister to those for whom this time will be difficult.

Now, I don't want to presuppose anything, or shove anyone into depression or dark places or make anyone anxious. I just want to be realistic about what's coming. Our state is, our Presbytery is, and so I'm joining with them, to offer a Biblical and spiritual perspective on this, and hopefully offer some practical things we can do, to not just weather the storm but come out stronger and more resilient on the other side of it, and with a greater witness to the love of God in our lives and through our community. Eventually we will get to the 'wiser living' phase; and I'd like us to truly be wiser when we get there!

So, our short series on perseverance will include persevering in mind and heart (today); persevering in hope (Heidi will bring that message to you next

week); persevering in prayer (Jesus told a couple great parables about persevering in prayer); and persevering in doing good, both for the sake of others and for the sake of our witness.

This morning, let's reflect together on persevering in mind and heart.

Hebrews 12:1-2 (this will be our theme text for the series)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Philippians 4:4-8

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about (dwell upon) these things.

Isaiah 26:3-4

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace— in peace because they trust in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for in the LORD GOD you have an everlasting rock.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Did you hear the one about the pastor who preached a looonnnng sermon one Sunday—much longer than normal, with 12 points (he figured 12 was a Biblical number), and because the sermon went long the entire worship service went long, and the following week he got some “feedback” from the congregation about it (like the man who left the service early, and told the pastor he left because he needed to get a haircut; the pastor said, “I saw you before the service; your hair looked fine.” And the man said, “Right, but by the time the sermon was done I needed one.”). So the next Sunday the pastor got up to preach and said to the congregation, “In response to last Sunday’s 12 point sermon, today’s sermon will be pointless.”

I don’t think today’s sermon will be pointless, and there were no complaints about last Sunday’s sermon being extra long, but suffice it to say that I am not going to test your perseverance this morning with a long sermon; or a sermon longer than what I usually give. There *will* be a prayer exercise at the conclusion that will take about 3-4 minutes, and I’d invite you to hang in there for that. It might be a useful exercise for you sometime in the future, if not this morning. You might want to have pen and paper handy for that...

In our passage from Hebrews we are told to run the race set before us *with perseverance*. Don't just run, the author says, but do so *with perseverance*. With persistence. This word is also translated as 'endurance' in some versions.

Can you think of a time in your life when you have had to persevere through something? When you have had to endure, not passively, but actively, through a challenging time? Think about that for a moment... What was it that you had to persevere through for a period of time? How did that go? What did you learn? And was the result when you got through it?

We are told to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. What is the race set before us? In the context of the letter to the Hebrews, it's the life of faith, throughout our entire life, up to the end. And for them, at that time, it included enduring through intense persecution of the Christians by the Romans.

Persevering in faith until life's end certainly applies to us; yet for our purposes *right now*, in 2020 specifically, the race set before us includes a pandemic, societal upheaval, and a presidential election. And for each of us, personally, it may include other things that are specific to our life right now: our family, our work, our health, our finances, our relationships. I think of teachers working hard to prepare to teach students online, and parents with young

children also working hard to parent children during this time, not to mention trying to be present to their kids in their online schoolwork from home. It may feel like a lot to persevere through, but Scripture says we can do it. And the Holy Spirit strengthens us to do it. And we have each other, and community resources, to help us persevere.

I've mentioned from time to time that I've been reading through the book of Revelation this year. I started a few weeks before covid hit, and have found that it's actually a great book of the Bible to read right now, not because it's about the apocalypse and doom and we're living in the end times and it's imminently upon us. That isn't what Revelation is about, primarily, anyway.

It's a pastoral a book written to, and for, persecuted people. They needed the jarring apocalyptic images and the grand drama to remind them that Jesus reigns, that God knows what he is doing in spite of evidence to the contrary, that suffering is not the last word even if it has to be endured for a time, and that the Lord of history will make all things right, at the right time. Jesus wins! Now, we are not being persecuted today and put to death for our faith like they were when Revelation was written, but we can glean the wonderful lessons and

encouragements from this book. And maybe I'll dive into that this year. I'm still pondering that.

But in Revelation chapter 13, after describing a blasphemous beast who utters lies incessantly and inflicts suffering on the people it says this in verse 10, "Here is a call for the perseverance and faith of the saints." And in chapter 14, after a message of hope, it says in verse 12, "Here is a call for the perseverance of the saints, those who keep God's word and hold fast to their faith in Jesus." These people were experiencing intense persecution and were told to persevere. God will prevail, you will overcome. So, hang in there; don't give up! Keep the faith; stay strong in the Lord. In other words, run the race with perseverance.

And whether you feel like you are living through the apocalypse, or this feels like an extended vacation, we need this word from God to persevere. Don't get freaked out, and, don't check out.

This morning I'd like to talk briefly about persevering in mind and heart.

The mind is a powerful thing. With it we can invent and create and experience abundance, or we can limit, create scarcity, and even destroy. What Scripture consistently teaches us is, that with a good attitude and dwelling on life-

giving thoughts, we have the capacity to change our lives, change our environment, and help others change for the better.

So here is a question to ponder: What is your mind's reflex? When you're not concentrating on something or preoccupied or distracted. Where does your mind reflexively go, in quiet moments? Now, if you are like me and answer that question honestly, my mind does not reflexively go to pleasant places.

Sometimes it luckily wanders into pleasant pastures, but that seems more the exception than the norm. I can easily go to places of worry, fear, self-criticism, criticism of others. Therefore I need to work at re-training and re-wiring my brain to take the better and higher road to lush and fruitful places, rather than, "Hey, I wonder what's down that dark and stinky road over there? I think I'll go find out."

Something the Bible and our Christian faith encourages us to do is to train the mind to begin to reflexively go to places that edify and build up—that build up yourself and build up others. That keep you 'in perfect peace' as it says in Isaiah, because your mind is steadfast; purposefully trained toward the good.

And as I read our passage from Philippians specifically, what I hear it saying is: feed your mind and heart nutritious spiritual and psychological food. Beware

of mental junk food. Just as you take care of your body with nutritious food that keeps you well, feed your mind and heart food that will keep them well. Sure, occasionally splurge on a mental warm double fudge brownie and whip cream. Apple pie, whatever. That might actually help from time to time, but not a steady diet.

Paul gives us a great list of things to ‘think upon.’ The word “think” here is also the word “dwell,” (think of dwelling in a home) which is also the word “meditate.” Let your mind *meditate* on these things. Let your mind & heart *dwell* on these things. The word is also used to describe a dog chewing on a bone. Isn’t that a great mental image? As a dog takes time to gnaw on a bone and work it over, take your time to dwell on things that are true, honorable, just, and so forth. Work them over, take time with them. That’s what we’re going to do in a prayer exercise shortly.

Feed your mind and heart nutritious spiritual, emotional, and psychological food. Consider what a steady mental and emotional diet would be for you. And, consider what *isn’t* a good diet for your mind and heart. Because the assumption here is, *don’t* feed your mind and heart what will be *bad* for it. Our passage from Hebrews tells us to toss away anything that hinders or weighs us down. What is

that for you? News? Social media? Regrets from the past? Resentments? Bad habits you are trying to change? Release them. And change your focus so you can lighten your load, and persevere.

One practical thing we can do: We can persevere in this way by being prepared for the coming winter—not literal winter, but ‘covid winter.’

For example, create a preparedness sheet. Just like we prepare our houses for winter (dad made storm windows for the big south and west facing picture windows), and we prepare our yard/garden. Any of you ever live in the upper midwest? You prepare for winter there or else! In Alaska you prepare your car, with studded tires or an engine block heater; in this part of the country we prepare for an earthquake by having extra water and MRE’s (meals ready to eat; or as the military called them, meals rejected by everyone). We have preparedness lists on our refrigerator or some easy to find place.

In the same way, this year we need to be as equally prepared for our covid winter to protect and nurture our hearts and minds. So it might be a good idea to prepare a list of things to remember to do, numbers to call when you need help, supplies to keep on hand and so forth.

And do it now. Don't wait until it's dark and raining and you're feeling isolated and sad. Do it now while it's still sunny and warm and you feel good. This is a way to build resilience now.

You can make a list, and find a partner and do it together with. Have fun with it. You can get on Zoom—there is a free version that will allow you 45-minute meetings. Make use of it: ask each other, 'what's on your list?'

A couple closing thoughts, and then our prayer exercise.

We persevere one day at a time. One day at a time. Jeremiah prays: "Your mercies are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." We don't persevere by thinking with dread about the long road ahead, which seems unending and uncertain, but by greeting the present moment, every present moment, with expectant hope. We persevere one day at a time, greeting each day with a reminder of God's presence with us and his mercies. Gratitude helps! The apostle Paul reminds us of that in our passage: pray, with gratitude.

Finally, what ultimately keeps us going is the personal, unalterable, persevering commitment that God makes to us. Perseverance is not the result of our great determination; it is the result of God's great faithfulness. We persevere, not because we have extraordinary personal stamina, but because God

is good—as we are reminded in Ephesians 3:17: we are “strengthened in our inner being with power from the Holy Spirit, as we are being rooted and grounded in love.” Perseverance comes by paying more attention to God, and less attention to what sucks the life out of us, when possible.

Hebrews: “Let us run with perseverance... looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him *endured* the cross...” (literally, “persevered the cross”). Our perseverance comes from looking to Jesus, giving *him* our attention, because he knows what it feels like as a human being to persevere, to endure, to the end. Jesus is the great perseverer, for our sakes and the sake of the world. We can ask him for strength and resolve and the resources we need to not to just get through this, but to become strengthened inwardly in the process.

Prayer exercise. You may want pen and paper to write some things down; or you can just sit back and listen now, or continue it later; you can adapt it, whatever helps you get into a good frame of mind and heart, prayerfully.

We’re going to go through the magnificent list from Philippians 4:8, the things the apostle Paul encourages us to meditate on (gnaw on) in mind and heart, and what I’d like us to do—now or whenever you’d like to do this—is write

down, or think of, one or two things that fit each word, for you. So you can generate a list of the “these things” that we let our minds dwell upon.

As we enter a time of prayer, first, it’s always good to clear the mind a bit. So, first, what do you need to set aside? What weighs you down, what hindrances, sins, regrets, worries do you need to let go of? We’ll take a moment, first, to release those. Picture a box next to you that you can put those things in—some people imagine a garbage bin (if the thoughts aren’t worth keeping). I usually picture box with “Jesus” written on it, to put things in and give them to him; maybe later I’ll take them up and we’ll address those things, he and I, but until then I want my mind clear.

Deep refreshing breaths, feet on the floor helps, feel your body relax, surrounded by God’s love and care, within and without. What do you need to set aside? What is weighing you down, or getting you tangled up, and distracting you from what is most important? Set those aside. Give them to God now, in this moment. Let them go, and don’t take them back. You don’t need those right now...

Now, let’s dwell on the things we are given to dwell upon from Phil.4:8. Some of these overlap in meaning, so don’t feel pressure to come up with

something new every time. If you want, write down what comes to mind—a word, a short phrase, a person. Here we go. What is:

True...

Honorable (noble)...

Just (things being made fair/equal)...

Pure (authentic)...

Pleasing (compelling)...

Commendable (what you could recommend)...

Excellent (beautiful)...

Worthy of praise...

You may find that you were surprised by something that came up.

Blessing: May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his son Jesus Christ our Lord, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.