



“PRESS ON”
SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20; PHILIPPIANS 3: 4b-14
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
October 8, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Imagine for a minute that your moment has arrived—the moment you’ve dreamed of—your moment—when you are called on to shine, to really do your thing—whatever that is—and the world is watching. This is your moment—what would your sound track be?

In Indiana, if you make it to the state championship in wrestling in your weight class, it is such a moment. A huge venue—packed full of people, total darkness, and the spot light goes to the place where you will run out when your name is called. And you get to pick the song they play when you enter. This choice of a song was a topic of conversation in our house during wrestling season in Indiana—if Sidney ever made it there, what would his song be?

We tossed around lots of options—and it became a game for us—it’s your moment, what’s the soundtrack?

Will you think less of me if one of the top contenders for me is a song by the rapper Eminem—Lose Yourself.

Really it’s just the chorus that I like:

*You better lose yourself in the music, the moment
You own it, you better never let it go
You only get one shot...
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime*

And it has a beat that gets you moving, your adrenaline flowing—it’s now or never—you better lose yourself in the music, the moment. This opportunity comes once in a lifetime.

It’s not very religious I know—and honestly, there are other songs that my heart tends to sing when I am in the real moments of truth that life presents—challenging moments when words are hard to come by, when life feels too hard, when someone I love is hurting, when it can seem like the world is coming undone—you know those moments—those moments when we are called on to be there, to be here, with courage, with strength, with resolve, with resilience.

This week has been one of those moments in our country.

Is it just me, or does it seem like these moments are coming pretty fast and furious these last several months? It was a week ago tonight that what’s being called the

worst mass shooting in modern US history happened in Las Vegas—queuing once again, the familiar refrains of law makers, TV talkers, and designated experts about why, how, and now what?

It's a tired and seemingly futile loop—this droning on about how we build our life together as a country, as communities, as the human race in the face of violence and the desire to do harm.

Our moment is not unlike the moment in time all those centuries ago when God spoke directly into the lives of a people exiled, traumatized, stuck in destructive patterns of relationship—with what we call the Ten Commandments.

This moment stands alone in Hebrew scripture as an unfiltered message from God—Holy Mystery spoke concretely, hopes and dreams literally cut into stone to get a message to God's people about how to live, how to love, how to work and rest and honor and do no harm.

It was a crossroads moment for God's people—the promise of God's fidelity, of God's loving kindness, of God's presence and power comes into human community with a force that changed the course of who we are and how we understand our responsibilities and our possibilities.

And God leads with some parameters about how we humans regard Holy Mystery—don't try to "domesticate" Holy Mystery, don't equate God with all the other things that vie for our loyalty and our attention, and don't invoke the power and purpose of God's name for trivial, extraneous, or, worse yet, even destructive purposes.¹

God centers God's hopes for us to not lose sight of Holy Mystery in the way we treat each other, in the way we understand our purpose in the world, in the ways we seek justice and extend mercy and embody love in our life together.

Where is such careful and loving community in our world today? Where are the communities we can trust? Where are the communities that truly know how to hold humanity gently and hold humanity accountable in ways that do not harm, but heal?

Paul was a good Jew—he had all the credentials—and he worked hard to cultivate a blameless life. He had life figured out—and he could check off all the right boxes on the righteousness questionnaire.

Paul had things figured out back in his Pharisaic days—in his letter to the Philippians, he wants them to know how much things have changed for him now that Christ is at the center of his life.

It's been easy for Christians to use passages like this from Paul to pit Christianity against the Jewish faith—and come up with a black and white moment of truth, a spiritual crossroads that a believer must come to: a choice between grace or the law.

But, this passage is not about such a decision, it is about a realization that the privileges we put so much stock in in human community are, in the end, worthless. Our confidence cannot come from our accomplishments, but from our relationship with God, and for us as Christians, it comes from our relationship with Christ.

“I want to know Christ,” Paul says. “And the power of his resurrection.”

Paul feels the pull of Christ's way in the world—and he is swept up in the power of God's proximity to human suffering and the promise of redemption that is alive in Christ's willingness to go the distance in this world that can be so cruel.

It is not by Paul's own efforts, but by the magnetic pull of God's unflinching love, that spurs Paul to press on—not holding on to a past obsessed with how he could control his status in the world, but stretching toward a future that gives itself to God's power to heal us and to set us free.

Mistaking our own efforts for the key to a life well lived is not a distortion unique to the Jewish faith. It is a dangerous distortion any religious practice can fall prey to. Paul is calling us to put our power in proper relationship to the power of Holy Mystery. And Christ helped him do that in a way that changed everything for him.

Another thing that happened this week—Tom Petty died of a heart attack—somebody who sang to us about resilience as an American character trait—

*I won't back down
No I won't back down*

*Well I know what's right
I got just one life
In a world that keeps on pushin' me around
... I'll stand my ground*

No I won't back down.

He wrote that song a couple of years after an arsonist burned his house down—the fire was set while Petty was in the house with his family. They made it out with their lives, but nothing else but the clothes on their back.

Tom Petty describes the feelings that went into the song as a mixture of “elation that they didn't get me, I survived” and the hard to process feeling “that someone wanted

me dead.” “I came back with positive music. I didn’t want to go into a dark corner. I was so glad to be alive.”²

The antidote to despair is belief—belief that redemption is true and possible and yearning to come to life in the ways we are together.

Where is such a careful and loving community in our world today? Where are the communities we can trust? Where are the communities that truly know how to hold humanity gently and hold humanity accountable in ways that do not harm, but heal?

“I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection.” Paul’s words sing to us of a possibility worth our attention in the world we are facing together these days. “I want to know Christ.” How do we seek to know him here, in a community that claims to be seeking after Jesus and learning to be Christ’s body in this world?

This week at Grace Covenant, while our country casts about for wisdom and a way forward, we pressed on—not in spite of the lamentations of our country, but because of them.

Grace Covenant has not backed down from our resolve to be people who are willing to fiercely love in difficult times. I’ve seen it this week with my own eyes in so many ways.

Grant requests are pouring in from potential ministry partners to our Serve Council—and your brothers and sisters on the Council prayerfully working together to discern how we don’t just give money, but we build relationships, we cultivate equity, we open ourselves up to change and growth.

This week in countless ways we have comforted each other with prayers through tears and fears—ministries of presence in hospital rooms and on street corners, in phone conversations, text messages, emails, and in meetings and Bible Study—this week we have continued to practice what it means to hold each other gently, to listen devoutly, to speak truth in love, and to support each other in times of need.

And this week I’ve seen you dreaming and stretching, hoping and praying, that Grace Covenant can be open to a critical look at ourselves as race and immigration continue to be open wounds in our country. Our Power and Race Team listened attentively to an invitation from Bill Buchanan at AYM to take a pilgrimage trip with members of All Souls Episcopal to Memphis to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Dr. MLK’s assassination in April. And the Creating Sanctuary Team continues its work attending DACA hearings with support and love.

I’ve seen you be careful with the sacredness of our shared space here at 789 Merrimon—from our staff and building committee considering the details of how to

making our building a place where we can do life-giving ministry, to people gathered to consider how to honor the holy ground that is our Memorial Garden, where we go to remember and to be present with our grief and our gratitude.

This week we've worked together on child safety protocols—how to make sure Grace Covenant is a place where children thrive and learn what healthy community feels like. And I've seen you seeking opportunities to study together and to explore difficult topics like violence, healthy relationships, and how to care for our planet.

These ministries of redemption, these ministries of resistance to despair, these ministries of belief that redemption is possible and a promise we are willing to stake our lives on—these ministries are alive and on the move every day at Grace Covenant—from our garden to our worship to our service to our theological curiosity to our entrepreneurial spirit around social justice issues to our ways of extending care to each other, being vulnerable with each other, and sharing hard truth together.

All this does not make us a perfect faith community—far from it. But all this does make us a promising faith community—and a place well worth our shared commitment to invest in what God is doing in our midst.

Now what? is the question we are asking ourselves this Fall, Grace Covenant. A moment of truth, to be sure, in the world we live in today.

For us to press on, to take our Faith Forward, your financial pledge and mine to this community will need to stretch—so that we can press on, so that we can rise to the occasion that is before us in this confusing and confounding world.

For us to press on, Grace Covenant, we must put our financial resources where our theological rhetoric is—Christ's call is not for us to be careful, but for us to be courageous.

It's our moment, Grace Covenant, and it won't be our last. The world is struggling—suffering under the weight of violence and greed and self-destruction. There are so many people picking up the pieces of a past that has left them weary and seeking a more promising future.

How do we live together in the face of it all?

We press on—we come together to grow, to give, to connect, to believe, to heal, to sing.

What will our sound track be?

Christ sets the cadence of our movement forward—if you give yourself to it you can feel the pull of our deep connection with each other and our deep connection with a world that desperately needs more love, more healing love.

Like the pounding hooves of horses caught up in a herd on the move—we may not know the destination, but we know we must press on together, forward, into a future drawing us toward a trustworthy place to be at home with each other.

The world needs a place like Grace Covenant to shine—to come into this moment with our best foot forward, with our FAITH FORWARD, our eyes set on the horizon of a world healed, reborn, with our ears tuned to the sound track of redemption.

*My life goes on in endless song
Above earth's lamentations,
I hear the real, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.*

Thanks be to God.

¹ For substantive treatment of first commandments, see Walter Brueggemann's article in the New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. I.

² Fresh Air, NPR, October 3, 2017. <http://www.npr.org/programs/fresh-air/2017/10/03/555330508/fresh-air-for-oct-3-2017-remembering-tom-petty>