



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
27 October 2019  
Sermon: Keeping Faith  
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Joel 2:23-32  
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

### **Joel 2:23-32**

O children of Zion, be glad  
and rejoice in the Lord your God;  
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,  
he has poured down for you abundant rain,  
the early and the later rain, as before.  
The threshing floors shall be full of grain,  
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.  
I will repay you for the years  
that the swarming locust has eaten,  
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,  
my great army, which I sent against you.  
You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,  
and praise the name of the Lord your God,  
who has dealt wondrously with you.  
And my people shall never again be put to shame.  
You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel,  
and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.  
And my people shall never again be put to shame.  
Then afterward  
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.  
I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

## **2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18**

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.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

"I feel lost," I said, as I sat in a circle of my peers in one of our debriefing sessions. I was 25, fresh out of seminary, and working for a year as a hospital chaplain. Chaplaincy, like parish ministry, like the life of faith itself, is full of ambiguities. A chaplain's work is compiled of transient relationships, brief conversations in hospital rooms. There's always the next visit, the next prayer at the bedside. Some feel heartfelt and meaningful, but overall there aren't a lot of clear markers of progress or success, of a job well done, of self-improvement. You try to be a genuine and faithful presence in people's lives as they face illness and hardships, but there's a lot of ambiguity in what that really means, or how to do it well. In contrast, in seminary and graduate school progress is always measured, calculated by grades and averages. Later as I went on to doctoral studies, those measures transformed into CV or resume lines, numbers of journal articles published, even a book deal. But on that day, working as a chaplain, after a grueling and exhausting shift, I said, "I feel lost." I wasn't really sure what it meant to live a life of faith in all the messiness of real life outside the classroom.

"You know what Richard," said my friend and fellow chaplain Nikki, who sat next to me in that debriefing circle, "if we are giving chaplaincy grades, I would definitely give you an A."

She was, of course, making fun of me, in a friendly way, breaking the tension in the room. I responded to her, also in a friendly way, with a few choice words I won't repeat from the pulpit.

What does the life of faith really look like? How do you know if you're really living it? Can it be measured? It's no wonder, in all this ambiguity, why people of faith are tempted to cling to ostensible measures of success, how we get preoccupied with salaries and bank accounts, 401ks or promotions, or even more subtle measures, like our children's GPAs, or our weight, our travels, things we can quantify, things we can compare. Churches also get caught up in numbers: membership totals and Sunday school class roles, budgets and pledges, building campaigns and mission grants. It's not wrong to pursue these things, of course, but we err if we mistake them for measures of the life of faith itself. Progressively minded Christians get caught up here too: We look to concrete measures of how we engage the world. Where do our resources go? Who are we partnering with? We want action. We want results.

Towards the end, 2 Timothy has these famous lines: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." How many of us, at the end of our lives, want to say such words? As Marcia recounted a few weeks ago, Paul's followers rather than Paul himself likely wrote this letter. Throughout, it alludes to Paul's persecution at the hands of the Roman empire. It begins, "Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel" (1:8). Later, it continues, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal" (2:8). And towards the end: "Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (3:12). Then in our lectern today, "From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness," which in

early Christianity was a symbol for martyrdom. The letter then is like a first-person obituary for Paul, a prisoner, likely a victim of Roman capital punishment, who nonetheless fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith.<sup>1</sup> The author writes admiringly of Paul's life of faithfulness. The language is so striking, it is easy to forget that Paul's success was elusive. Throughout, the letter tells of followers turning from him. "All deserted me," it says at the end. And then Paul died in chains, an outcast, an enemy of the state, "poured out like a libation." Keeping the faith here does not follow traditional measures of success.

It is called the Legacy Museum, as in, the legacy of the history of institutionalized brutality and oppression of Black peoples in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Members of our church returned from a pilgrimage to the museum in Montgomery, Alabama just last Sunday. The museum is laid out in chronological order. At the entrance stands a brick wall with white painted words: "You are standing on a site where enslaved people were warehoused." A video beside the wall plays on a loop a mother being sold away from her daughter. From there, you enter into a dark hallway, where holograms of enslaved people speak to you behind bars. You have to strain your ear to hear each of them, as you go cell to cell, listening to their stories. They speak of the humiliations and brutalities of the auction block, about their children, whom they will never see again, sold to other plantations. In the background, in a cell that's facing the hallway, there's a woman, who is screaming the words of a spiritual. It's not one that I recognized. It's more wailing than song.

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<sup>1</sup> See David W. Johnson's commentary on the passage in Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Vol. 3.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 417-418.

<sup>2</sup> The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org>

As you leave the hall, turning the corner, you enter this giant room, the size of this sanctuary or larger. On the front wall is a timeline, beginning with the transatlantic slave trade and ending in modern times. It stretches the length of the room, with pictures of racial terror, the brutal conditions of the middle passage, lynching, and Jim Crow. At the opposite wall across from the timeline are glass jars of red and black and brown soil, collected from lynching sites all around the country. The name of the victim and the place are written simply on each jar. There were many from North Carolina. At least three men were lynched here in Buncombe county.<sup>3</sup>

Then, as you walk down the timeline, you move into modern times. Slavery turns into Reconstruction, Reconstruction to Black Codes and Jim Crow, Jim Crow to modern day mass incarceration. The wall records horrifying facts: Our country has the highest incarceration rate in the world, 2.2 million people.<sup>4</sup> 34% of the prison population is African American, who are incarcerated at a rate of 5 times that of whites.<sup>5</sup> There are more black men in prison today than were enslaved at the beginning of the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> There are people in prison today serving life sentences handed down when they were children, because of laws like the 3 Strikes and You're Out regulations passed in the 90s. At the end of the timeline, you see a black mother holding her 15-year-old son who had just been sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison. She is collapsing into him. You are reminded that ruthless family separation is at the core of our

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Calder. "Lynching Memorial Confronts our Country's Past." Mountain Xpress. Aug. 31, 2018. <https://mountainx.com/news/lynching-memorial-confronts-our-countrys-past/>

<sup>4</sup> Drew Khan, "5 Facts Behind America's High Incarceration Rate." CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/28/us/mass-incarceration-five-key-facts/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> NAACP. "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

<sup>6</sup> Elev8 Staff. "There Are More Black Men In Prison Today Than Were Enslaved in 1850." Elev8. <https://elev8.hellobeautiful.com/495595/there-are-more-black-men-in-prison-today-than-were-enslaved-in-1850/>

nation's history. Nearby, you can hear the recording of an inmate, who tells you the story of how he was sentenced to life at twelve years old, and then went into solitary confinement at sixteen, where he stayed for eleven years.

We sometimes engage in thought exercises. What if I had been alive during the time of slavery? Or the racial terror of lynching? Would I have spoken out? Would I have tried to do something, like become an abolitionist? But the truth is that we still live in such times. They are our present. Mass incarceration is an unjust system of oppression that profits off human misery and is sustained by a culture of white supremacy that targets communities of color and gives longer and more sentences to African Americans.<sup>7</sup>

This Reformation Sunday, we remember the motto of Martin Luther: "Sola Gratia, Grace alone," as we commemorate his ninety-five theses, nailed to the church door in Wittenberg 302 years ago. Too often we think of grace itself in transactional terms: We sin, and God forgives us. This understanding of grace is deeply influenced by church theologians of the middle ages like Anselm of Canterbury, who worked out the concept of grace through the metaphors of the feudal system, with lenders and debtors.<sup>8</sup> That concept has its utility, yes, but grace is more foundational than a transaction with a forgiving God. More foundational is the grace of God that names each of us as children of God, of human dignity, the grace of God that calls each of us by name. This grace, freely and abundantly given, stands in such contrast to the world we

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Ingraham. "Black Men Sentenced to More Time for Committing the Exact Same Crime as a White Person, Study Finds." *The Washington Post*. Nov. 16, 2017.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/11/16/black-men-sentenced-to-more-time-for-committing-the-exact-same-crime-as-a-white-person-study-finds/>

<sup>8</sup> Anselm. *Cur Deus Homo: Why God Was Made Man*. (Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1865).  
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044014196430&view=1up&seq=8>

live in, the world of racist mass incarceration, the world of capital, where we value and rate ourselves by monetary numbers and social comparisons.

God's grace sustained, moved and empowered Paul, even in his chains, as it has for so many of the oppressed people through the centuries. "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength...The Lord will stand by me and rescue me from every evil attack," says this Biblical obituary to a man executed by the state as a criminal. This grace is not cheap; it is not an invitation to passivity in this world; it is not an excuse to forget or whitewash the sins of the past. The grace of God, that calls each of us by name and declares that every single person is a child of God stands in judgment on the ways of our world. Standing on the foundation of slavery, we've denied grace and bought into to a system of metrics and comparisons, rewards and punishments. Rather than therapy and rehabilitation, today our taxes and our compliancy empower a system of locking people up and throwing away the key, of othering minority races by branding them as criminal, ensuring those on the margins are kept out of sight, out of mind. God's grace is a call for us to live with one another in a new and different way, rather than being silent in the face of systems that treat people like they are not people, like they do not bear the image of our creator.

Are you tired of running this race? Not the life of faith that Paul speaks of but the race we run to secure and justify ourselves in the world of capital and punishment, the world of markets and jails. Whenever you grow weary, in your office, in your school, at your home, in the moments when you want to cry out that you feel lost, remember that God's grace surrounds you, and that by grace God chose as her messiah and her greatest apostle not the

exalted, not the rich or the successful, but the criminal, the ones condemned by the state, the ones who died outcast and in chains.

This table is a reminder of the grace of God. This table is a sign and medium of grace. From here God's grace calls out to you, not in scarcity or in judgment but in sheer, unmerited, unending abundance. That abundance does not make sense in the world that colonialism built, but it is nonetheless real. Let us come to this table, because God's grace is given freely to you. May it strengthen you in the life of faith, the life we are called to lead, where we point over and again to the God of freedom and liberation, the God of love who calls us to love and to liberate and to remember. Amen.