



“ENDURANCE”

SCRIPTURE: 1 CORINTHIANS 10: 1-13

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, March 20, 2022 (Hybrid Worship)

The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Iditarod Video (Play with sound both in sanctuary and on life stream; MMS will talk as the video plays)

The Iditarod Dog Sled Race is run every year from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska.

1000 miles in whatever conditions the musher and their team of 12-16 sled dogs encounter. The trail covers the old US Mail path when mail was delivered by dog sled before the airplane.

Sometimes conditions in Alaska make air flight impossible—that happened in 1925 during a diphtheria outbreak when a team of dogs led by the famous dog, Balto, made it to Nome with the life-saving serum.

Sled dogs have endurance that is a marvel to us human beings. How do they do it?

Their bodies actually change how they metabolize energy and oxygen so quickly that they can "reprogram" their bodies' responses to stress after one day of competition, something humans can't do.

In fact, the more a sled dog races, the better they become at metabolizing the toll of such strenuous effort.

It is a biochemical response. As long as they have adequate food, they will get tired and need to rest at regular intervals, but their bodies do not go into oxygen debt that a human body goes into when such demands are placed on us.

A sled dog's body knows how to absorb energy and put it to use—move it to the muscles that need it.¹

It's like an internal suit of armor their bodies put on to protect their muscles and enable them to just keep going.²

These dogs have genes similar to a woolly mammoth in terms of temperature regulation and resistance and can endure temperatures as low as -40 F.³

Even as all dogs have this physiological key to awe-inspiring endurance, not all dogs have what it takes to be a sled dog. And even among sled dogs, some have that special intangible drive, communications skills, and mental toughness that make them love the training and

¹ <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/science/2021/03/27/secrets-of-alaska-sled-dogs-amazing-endurance/>

² <https://www.livescience.com/2898-itarod-dogs-endurance-secret-revealed.html>

³ <https://www.inverse.com/science/the-science-behind-sled-dogs>

the intensity of running day after day in extreme conditions and want to respond to the instructions of their human companion.

These dogs can teach us a lot about what it means to live into the marvel of how God made our bodies and spirits to weather storms and accomplish things we can think are impossible.

God gives us the tools and inner resources to endure—to keep going when it's hard. The question is—how do we endure and what switches get flipped in us when we are faced with extreme challenges and hardships?

(video will run all the way until it fades to black—there may be a break in my speaking as the video finishes at the very end. Make sure to let it play all the way until it fades to black)

And that's the question we carry with us into this difficult passage in 1 Corinthians today.

And it's the same question we carry with us into the extreme challenges we face as human beings on this planet. We are living in and through withering realities—and it's enough to break us sometimes. What keeps us going? What enables and empowers us to endure?

But more than that, how do we endure faithfully—how do we endure without defaulting into ways of surviving that inflict harm to others and to ourselves?

First there is some real talk we need to have about this passage—and about the way Paul's teachings have been used and abused by human beings and by the church.

The Bible has been weaponized time and time again by communities, by cultures, and by the church. And passages like this one have cost people their lives—when we see mention of things like “sexual immorality” and divine punishment, we need to pause and acknowledge the tragic history that has been propped up by passages like this one.

During the AIDS epidemic, passages like this one were evoked with a grotesque kind of accusation that AIDS was punishment for homosexuality. We need to say together that this passage has nothing to do with homosexuality. Homosexuality is NOT sexual immorality. Homosexuality is not a sin that causes punishment and death. We need to acknowledge the pain and the harm inflicted by distorted appropriation of this text. And I want to say, as a follower of Jesus and as an ordained minister in the Christian faith, I am sorry, I am deeply

and profoundly sorry for the harm that has been done by my faith tradition to our LGBTQIA siblings and that continues still today.

Paul's teachings and passages like this one have also been appropriated and used to feed the horrible abomination of anti-Semitism. Christians have taken texts like this and found license not only to blame but to abuse and even murder our Jewish siblings. We need to acknowledge the pain and the harm inflicted by this distorted appropriation of the Bible. And we need to say together that this text is not about what's wrong with Judaism or with those who practice Judaism.

This passage is about us—it's about us, Grace Covenant, and all faithful people, and how easily people who want to believe we are faithful can grow impatient and impulsive when God doesn't show up on our time table or in the way we expected.

But before we go there—before we dig into how this passage calls us to a deep and more enduring faith, I want to say as a follower of Jesus and as an ordained minister in the Christian faith, I am sorry, I am deeply and profoundly sorry for the harm that has been done by my faith tradition to our Jewish siblings throughout history and that continues still today.

Siblings let us hold silence for a moment in that acknowledgement of harm and in the sorrow of all that has been lost because of that harm.

(hold silence)

I wonder if we can find the capacity within ourselves to listen to Paul differently today. So many have been taught to listen to scripture so they can figure out who to other, who to blame, who to shame, who to cast out, who to look at as an example of what not to be.

But today let's listen to Paul as someone speaking to his own people—to those he knew and loved, for those he was watching lapse into self-destructive and harmful ways of being. Paul is basically saying to the Corinthians, please don't repeat the abusive cycles of our ancestors. He's calling on them to break the cycle—to stop the harm.

Listen for Paul not so we can "other" people who we think have lost their way, but so we can recognize the temptations within ourselves to succumb to behaviors that traumatize and perpetuate cycles of abuse.

These kinds of temptations are always there for all people who endeavor to live a life of faith.

Talking truthfully about the ways our ancestors lost their way, or were not able to metabolize anxiety and fear without reverting to violence—is what we are being called to do right now in America.

And while we like to blame others—the ones who don't want CRT taught in schools or who try to entrench how oppression is legalized and codified, we also are carriers of these habits—these ways of enduring the challenges of human life that just perpetuate the harm.

Paul is making accusations from the inside, not the outside.

Paul is suggesting that we open our minds and hearts up to the way our ancestors responded to the things that tested their faith. Many, he maintains, reverted to behaviors that were not faithful, behaviors that perpetuated harm. Many did not endure in ways that brought healing to their communities, many did not endure in ways that made the world a less violent, less fraught place to be. In fact, Paul maintains, many responded to the stress, to challenges in ways that replicated violence—continued cycles of trauma and abuse.

Talking openly about it is one of the most important steps in moving us into a phase of generational healing—not reproducing harm for the next generation to be weighted down with again.

Paul is saying that God was faithful to the ancestors, but some (many) of them still were not able to stay the course. And Paul is worried because he sees many of the Corinthians following the same path as some of the ancestors. He is warning them to learn from their mistakes, to be instruments of generational healing instead of tools of retrenched oppression and harm.

And those temptations can all be contained in one word: idolatry.

Faithful people of all sorts struggle with the temptation to create idols—to hurry God along when we are tired of waiting, to create gods out of things we can touch, things we can control. Idolatry is a way that humans have managed anxiety for centuries, for generations. And the results have often been devastating.

Idolatry distorts us, it contorts us. It twists and mangles us. It tells us lies about what is important and what is expendable. Idolatry fools us into looking for God when we are lost in ways that actually estrange us from God even more.

This is what Paul is warning his own people about—he is warning them that they may be getting caught up in the scripts of their forbearers—the scripts they don't even realize they are following. The coping skills that have been passed down generation to generation that don't change anything—they only make the hurt harder to heal.

Sexual immorality—abuse, rape, human sex trafficking. Paul sees the Corinthians as a danger to themselves—already showing signs that they are prone to idolatry—prone to creating gods that are more palatable to them, that allow their way of life to not be disrupted.

What are warnings for our beloved community? How are we following the unhealthy scripts of some of our ancestors?

Making whiteness an idol—by refusing to question it, by refusing to get distance from it. White people surrendered our ethnic identities, our cultural heritage for the idol of supremacy and dominance—we let the lies of white supremacy take away the gifts of where we come from and what we're really made of.

Many of our ancestors were both pawns and colluders in the grandest plan this world has ever seen to concentrate wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Just like any idol, this particular golden calf has cultivated deep delusion.

Paul is warning us about this exact thing—and telling us to look clear eyed at our ancestors. He is inviting the Corinthian church to see how they are living out the same scripts their ancestors did—the ones that constantly mistake dominance and consumption for God's favor for them above others.

The immorality of supremacy and dominance is what Paul is warning us about. Making this passage about anything else is an attempt at distracting from the real race we are running together, Grace Covenant.

We are not trying to outrun the “others” -- the ones that we try to blame for our problems. We've already lost if that is how we chose to use our energy.

We are trying to get better at metabolizing the stress and strain of being human in a world so prone to harm and so full of sorrow. God made us for endurance, but not the kind of endurance that tries to take shortcuts when we need to change, when we need to dig even deeper to find the reserves God has given us that enrich our collective life instead of erode and destroy it.

When we long for a better world, but keep settling for the status quo—our bodies need more direction from our spirits, our intentions, our will about how to navigate this conflict of assignment. Why endure the pain if this is as good as it gets?

God made our bodies and spirits to weather storms and accomplish things we think are impossible.

God gives us the tools and inner resources to endure—to keep going when it's hard. Just like those sled dogs—God made us to endure in ways that give us life, not suck the life out of us.

God is calling us to believe there is purpose in our endurance—and that the ways we endure matter. What is the world you are longing for? And what are the idols that are holding you back from manifesting that new world even now?

We are made to endure—and we are gifted with a love that makes endurance a chance for us to heal, a chance for us to find our way to God and each other. A chance for us to find our way to the belonging that we all need to be fully alive, to finally be home.

Thanks be to God.