10/19-20/19 The Good Fight Rev. Amy Haines

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

In less than two weeks, we will celebrate the second most expensive holiday—Halloween.

How many of you have some sort of Halloween decoration up in your yard or your home?

How many of you have already bought some candy, either to hand out or to eat yourself?

How many of you with children have already figured out this year’s costume?

I will confess that my household still needs to buy candy, as well as figure out the kids’ costumes. I will also confess that Halloween is not one of my favorite holidays. I have never been a fan of haunted houses, scary movies, or bloody costumes. While I don’t ind “It’s The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown” or “Casper the Friendly Ghost” anything much beyond that is beyond me.

Although Halloween is not my favorite holiday, it does fascinate me in the way we make fun of death on that night, yet in the light of any other day don’t want to talk or prepare or even think about death.

But death comes to all of us. Sometimes too young. Sometimes unexpectedly. Sometimes after a life well lived. How do we face the end of our lives? In denial, or fear, or in peace, and with preparation? When we reflect back over our lives, however short or long we have lived, do we have regrets, or do we give thanks?

In our Scripture lesson today, the apostle Paul is nearing the end of his life, knowing that soon he will be put to death by the Roman Empire. He is now under house arrest in Rome, unable to travel from city to city and faith community to faith community to encourage the early church.

Instead, he writes to as many churches and as many leaders as possible. Today’s passage is written to a young leader in Ephesus named Timothy, a third generation Christian who has been sent to straighten out a church being enticed by false doctrine to move away from their faith in a crucified and risen Savior.

Paul is writing to Timothy his end of life reflections. And as he looks ahead to death, he gives thanks to God. And as he looks back over his life, including its struggles, he gives thanks to God.

Paul then encouraged Timothy to do the same. And today, through Timothy, Paul is encouraging us to also give thanks.

For on this journey of life, on this journey we call faith, no matter what we face, God is with us.

God is with us in our struggles and our joys. God is with us in the highs and in the lows. And because God is with us, we can have the strength and courage and perseverance to live for Christ each and every day, until our very last breath.

The great evangelist Billy Graham trusted God’s strength and presence throughout his life.

He trusted God to give him the words to proclaim the powerful story of the cross and the empty tomb around the world and on TV when his crusades drew millions of followers.

He trusted God to give him the strength to stand firm when he insisted his crusades were not to be segregated. He trusted God to give him the love to remain faithful to his wife and his family.

And when his wife Ruth died, and he had to face an aging body that slowed him down, Graham had to trust God as he learned how to age well. He had been taught how to trust in God’s promise of eternal life, how not be afraid of death, but he had not been taught how to age well.

So at 92 years-old, Billy Graham wrote a book called “Nearing Home: Life, Faith and Finishing Well.” In the chapter “Fading Strength but Standing Strong” Graham pens these words:

“Life is seldom easy as we grow older, but old age has its special joys—the joy of time with family and friends, the joy of freedom from responsibilities we once had, and the joy of savoring the little things we once overlooked. But most of all, as we learn to trust every day into His hands, the golden years can be a time of growing closer to Christ. And that is life’s greatest joy.”

--Billy Graham Nearing Home p. 91

President Jimmy Carter would echo Billy Graham’s words, as at age 95 he still finds ways to grow close to Christ and share his faith. From celebrating 73 years of marriage, to teaching his Sunday School class, to still volunteering for Habitat for Humanity, President Carter wants his faith to tell his story more than his politics.

Who in your life has been an example of faith and faithfulness? Who has shown an abiding trust in God through life’s ups and downs, joys and struggles? Often our examples of faith are older than we are, yet not always.

..Catherine was in a nursing home several years before her death. She had restricted mobility, and her health was fragile. But she knew all the residents and patiently listened to their concerns. She showed them the compassion of Christ and had many opportunities to witness.

The Lord used her even in her own hours of weakness.

..A 96 year-old grandmother has lots of time at home alone. She says, “I just sit in my chair and go through my prayer list. My goodness, there are so many people to pray for that it seems I run out of time.”

--Billy Graham Nearing Home p.90

..In Pittsburgh there once lived a young boy who ended up under hospice care for inoperable cancer. 18 months prior his parents realized that he wasn’t running normally and his speech was slurred. While his diagnosis was grim, his life wasn’t. A typical boy, he loved his Steelers and Penguins. He also loved to laugh, and knew the power of laughter. Even while he was facing the end of his life, he tried to bring laughter and love to other children he met in the hospital by beginning a stuffed animal drive in order to give every child at the hospital a new stuffed animal so that they know that they are not alone and they are not forgotten.

--k-love radio, Scott and Kelli show, heard on 10-25-13

No matter where we are today in the ages and stages of life, no matter where we are today on our faith journeys, may we listen to the apostle Paul encourage us to respond to God’s faithfulness with our faithfulness, continuing on until our very last breaths to fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith.

**Fight the Good Fight**

Does it ever feel like life is one big battle, or a series of ongoing smaller battles? Are those battles about things that matter, or personal preferences? Are those fights ones that belittle others, or stand up for others? Often in life we must pick and choose which battles we are going to fight, yet how often do we pick what we think we will win rather than what we know is right?

The apostle Paul was called to fight the good fight of faith, choosing to spread the good news of Jesus in an often hostile environment of the cities of the Roman Empire.

Paul’s road of faith was not an easy road. Transformed from a persecutor to pastor of the Christian faith, Paul was often mistrusted by the Jews and not welcome by the Gentiles.

In order to spread the good news of Jesus, Paul had to fight against the belief in multiple gods, against selfish attitudes and apathy toward religion, and against the struggles of the early church losing its Spirit.

Not everyone was open to Paul’s message of good news, so he experienced harassment and beatings, rejection and arrest, ridicule and resistance.

I suspect that many of the battles Paul fought long ago we are still fighting today. Against selfishness and apathy. Against the lure of other gods and the scandal of the cross.

Yet, like, Paul, we are also called by God to fight the good fight, standing firm for Christ, loving God and loving neighbor in sacrificial ways, being the light of Christ to a world that could care less.

There are other fights that could occupy our time, that I would not consider the good fight.

Sometimes we fight for our own way. Sometimes we fight in ways that belittle others, especially on social media. Sometimes we fight because we are not willing to forgive.

Those are not the good fight.

When we fight the good fight of faith, the questions for us are not “How will we die” and “When will we die”, But “How will we live in such a way that we are ready for eternal life?” and “How does what I do every day bring honor to God and share Christ with others?”

**Finish the Race**

While we are called to fight the good fight of faith every day, we are also called to run the race of faith with eternity in mind. There is a time when each one of us will end our race.

Will we give up early, or finish well?

I have never been an athlete, but have always been fascinated by those who can run. The closest I ever came to athletics was marching band in high school and walking to class on the hills of Muskingum College. But my younger sister Lauren was a cross-country runner.

She knows what it is like to run multiple miles over differing terrain. She knows how to condition her body to compete mile after mile. Lauren knows that no two cross-country courses are the same.

Instead of running around in circles on a flat track, cross-country runners will have some places that are hilly, some places that are flat, and some places that are rough terrain. Those tracks sound a bit like our lives, do they not? A mixture of joy and sorrow, strength and weakness, struggles and celebration, ups and downs. Yet in order to finish the race, runners have to face whatever is in front of them, putting one foot in front of the other until they cross the finish line.

This weekend is the Columbus Marathon. While there are a few who are competing to win the race, many more marathon runners have a goal to simply finish the race, or beat their personal best.

..Georgene Johnson, at age 42, once ran the Cleveland marathon by accident (all 26 miles, 385 yards of it). She lined up with the wrong group at the starting line. Not the 10K group, where she belonged. But the 26-mile group, where she didn't. It wasn't until the four-mile mark that she realized her mistake. So she just kept going, finishing the race in four hours and four minutes. But listen to what she said later by way of explanation: "This isn't the race I trained for. This isn't the race I entered. But, for better or worse, this is the race I'm in."

Relatively few of us are exactly where we figured we'd be....doing exactly what we figured we'd be doing. But we are where we are, and (for better or worse) we're keeping our feet moving.

--William A. Ritter, Collected Sermons, sermons.com, adapted

What God cares about is that we finish, not win, the race of faith. And in order to finish we must never give up, but continue on step by faithful step. There may be times in this race of faith when we have a lot of energy and are running at peak performance; there may be times in this race of faith when we struggle to put one foot in front of the other; and there may be times in this race of faith when we are enticed to be pulled off course.

Think about how even within the church we are tempted to get sidetracked. We look at the gifts of those around us and are tempted to leave the work of ministry and mission up to “someone else.” We want our own ways rather than God’s ways in moments of struggle as well as moments of pleasure. How easy it is to get mad at the humanity of someone else and say, “That’s it! I give up! I am leaving this bunch of hypocrites!” But all of these are excuses for leaving the race of faith behind to follow the selfish and destructive ways of the world.

Sometimes we just want to say, “Stop! Jesus, you are asking too much of me and I don’t want to follow you if the road will not be easy or I cannot be in control or I have to do more than believe and show up once in a while.”

We might be tempted to quit, yet God calls us onward, to finish the race of faith. Through trial and struggle, through sorrow and suffering, through celebration and joy, God calls us to keep going. And when we stray off course, God calls us to get back in the race.

Like a runner, we must be disciplined to run the race of faith, relying on God’s strength, God’s word and God’s Spirit to guide us. To finish the race of faith well we must be committed, committed to Christ, to our faith journeys, and to one another in the church. We’ll talk more about this commitment over the next four weeks.

**Keep the Faith**

Paul encourages us to fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith.

Can you imagine how many times the apostle Paul may have wanted to quit? How many times he may have wondered if all that he endured was worth the pressure? Yet he kept the faith.

He stuck to the good news of Jesus at all costs.

At Annual Conference last summer, Bishop Mande Muyombo encouraged all of us West Ohio United Methodists to keep the faith. Keep the faith when the church structure appears to be collapsing. Keep the faith when the culture deems the church irrelevant. Keep the faith when people question why you believe what you believe. Keep strong your faith in Jesus, for that faith is your firm foundation when the rest of the world seems like sinking sand.

..After World War II an English officer, who was in the same prison with German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, described how at the end of a worship service for the other prisoners a door was opened, and two civilians entered the cell. "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us."

Every person present knew the implication of those words. It was a summons to death.

But in the brief moment before he was led away by the guards, Bonhoeffer took the English officer aside and said to him, "This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life."

-- Gary Carver “Life as Prelude” sermonsuite.com

Bonhoeffer’s words remind me of the final stanza of Natalie Sleeth’s *Hymn of Promise*,

written at the time of her own husband’s death:

“In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;

In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity,

In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.”

While we may not be able to predict our deaths, we can prepare for our deaths. We can learn to not be afraid of death because of our faith in Jesus, who overcame death in this world, and offers us the promise of life eternal. We can learn to be ready for death whenever it may come through living each day fighting the good fight, finishing well the race and keeping the faith no matter what we face. We can learn to give thanks even in death for we trust in God’s presence and promises and providence throughout our lives.

May we live as those prepared to die, and die as those prepared to live.

May it be so. Let us pray.