

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Renewal

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

June 6th, 2021

“Start Again” by Walter Brueggemann

You are the One who has brought our Lord Jesus Christ again to life from the dead; You are the One who by your summoning imperative has caused the worlds to be; You are the One who by your faithfulness has give a son to our vexed mother Hannah; You are the One who has the will and power to begin again, to start anew. You are the only self-starter whose name we know. And so we bid you, start again, start here, start now, start with us and with our school, start with your mercy, and with your justice, and with your compassion, and with your peace. Make the world new again, and young again, and innocent again...Start before it is too late, Amen.

“Renewal: Living by Faith”

¹³ But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—“I believed, and so I spoke”—we also believe, and so we speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul invokes a powerful message of togetherness and connectedness in whatever we face in our life journey. Quoting Psalm 116:10, Paul is attempting to keep the community hopeful. He describes the persecution and obstacles he has faced as he has traveled throughout the Mediterranean region. Yet even through these trials and tribulations that are described, this section of scripture encourages us to hold on to our faith in one another and the gospel. What is faith? Can we lose faith?

Faith could be described as a lot of things because faith means something different to each of us, but faith to me is most easily described through a quote from the character, Pop’s, on the Netflix’s Marvel series, Luke Cage. Pop says this whenever Luke faces an insurmountable decision, “Never backward. Always forward.” We may have differing opinions on what moving forward means or moving backward entails, but the gospel teaches us the only way forward is a path that leads us all to a nurturing,

compassionate community built on the principles of love, justice, and grace. "Never backward. Always forward."

Faith in scripture is more often than not described as a deliverance from the difficulties we face. Think of the Israelites in Exodus, when God hears their cries as the Egyptian empire has enslaved them. Think of Hagar and Ishmael as they are about to starve in the wilderness and die, God delivers them to safety and restores in them the living giving water needed to sustain their journey. God's deliverance for God's creation is seen on the cross as Jesus cries out in desperation for God to deliver him into the final stages of his life, death, and resurrection. Suffering is inevitable. We will never end all suffering in this world, but we can alleviate suffering for those around us. Thus, our suffering is inevitable, but through scripture and faith, we hold on to the truth and the hope that our deliverance is also inevitable. The study notes in one of my Bibles says this, "Weakness and suffering signal God's empowering presence" (The Jewish Annotated New Testament, p 321). God is with us and feels our pain in our suffering.

In verse 14, the phrase used is, "He [Christ] will bring his presence along with you," or "will bring us with you into his presence. Jesus invites us to be a part of the Beloved Community. Beloved Community does not mean we won't suffer, but when we suffer, we find hope and deliverance in knowing Christ, and the Body of Christ, suffer with us. We are never alone, even when we are physically distant and even when our mental health suffers and tells us we are alone. You never walk alone. "Never backward. Always forward."

Even though faith is often seen as an individual journey, and certainly is in some aspects, deliverance from God is not meant for one sole person, nor is it meant for one single group. The opening chapters of Genesis do not read, "In the beginning, God created the world for Kevin Patrick Garman who will be born in the year 1989 in Brooksville Florida. Only Kevin will know of God's awesome power because God loves Kevin so much." No! God says that Jesus, God's son, will be sent into the world, not to condemn it, but to save it, because Creation is worth saving. All Life! All Creation! All of humanity! That means Jesus came to restore all life to the rivers and forests, to the endangered species and ecosystems, to Guatemalans, Russians, Eritreans, Americans. All Creation is invited to the table of grace.

Living by Faith

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸ because we look not at what can be seen

but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

Through reading this section, we understand not only is our suffering inevitable, but death is inevitable through our mortal lives as well. If you listen to any physicist speaking about life in the universe or any evolutionary biologist speak on how we came to be, then you will also hear them say the same that death is a part of life. Our galaxy is finite. Our cosmos is finite. However, in the scripture we read today, we understand this is only part of our journey. We may not be able to fill in the details of what comes next, but death is simply an illusion.

One of my friends at Iliff School of Theology, we will call him Danny, shared a story with me about the time he spent at a monastery and a conversation about death between he and one of the Trappist monks. My friend Danny booked a weekday stay at the Trappist monastery called the Abbey of Gethsemane in Bardstown, Kentucky. Trappist monks are silent throughout the majority of their day. The only time they speak is at prescribed times of worship as they recite liturgies, prayers, and hymns. There are times blocked out where you can visit with the monks to speak, but they are limited to specific times of the day in specific places. The point of remaining silent is to hear the voice of God speaking to you as you tour the rolling, green hills of the Kentucky pastures or as you sit in the chapel praying for God to hear your prayer.

During one of these prescribed times of being able to speak, my friend Danny has a conversation with one of the monks in the library. They begin speaking about their favorite scriptures, stories, and characters in the Bible, but the monk senses Danny wants to speak about something deeper and asks what he really came to talk about. Danny is going through a difficult time in his life as he transitions careers, moves to another state, and tries to reconnect with family members he has lost a connection with over the years. He has recently lost a dear friend and Danny asks the monk, "what is the purpose of life? How do we find meaning in such trying circumstances?" The monk silently ponders for a moment his eyes looking to the corners of the room. After a few minutes of silence, the monk walks over to the wall nearest to them and says this.

Life is like this wallpaper. We can see the wallpaper, touch it, smell it after it is freshly placed, hear it as workers construct it, and you could taste it, but I don't advise it. However, this is how we experience and perceive wallpaper on this wall. Yet, there is still something beneath this wallpaper. The foundations below keeping the wall connected and upright. The beams giving shape and structure to the wall in order to place the wallpaper. The dry wall and other materials ensuring the wall remains intact. And when you get through the wall, there is another room, another building. Beyond that a pasture

filled with animals, trees, streams, towns, and people. Life is only what we perceive, but death is only an illusion.

This story may help illustrate our point today but perceiving death as an illusion is not a new concept. Philosophers, particularly Hellenistic philosophers of Paul's day, have debated on what is death for as long as debating ideas has existed. Our earliest ancestors experienced death and came up with rituals on how to honor our loved ones, and they understood death as simply another journey to meet our ancestors. Popular culture wrestles with this question as well. Think of the Matrix when Neo is confronted with the decision to stay in the matrix and take the blue pill or perceive a new reality by taking the red pill and freeing himself from the illusion the Matrix has created. This is not just a Christian concept either. I took a class on Buddhist philosophy at Iliff and Theravada Buddhists have debated over life and death for centuries. Our artists, musicians, poets, and storytellers throughout the world and throughout our history as human beings have expressed themselves in such profound, meaningful ways, as they have wrestled with their own mortality. Always remember, death is but an illusion and you are never alone. "Never backwards. Always forward."

In the final verse of this scripture today, Paul says this,

"5 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

From reading the first letter to the Corinthians, we know that Paul speaks of the spiritual body and the physical body. The spiritual body is almost like the image of God to Paul as it is something within each of us now, but the physical body are the bodies we presently occupy and the bodies that others perceive as. In context to this scripture, our faith, our hope, our deliverance, comes in knowing that the gospel teaches us we are enough, just the way we are. We are not alone, and we will never be alone in the trials we face no matter how hard we or others try and tell us we must face this journey alone. We are never alone because God is with us in our joy and our suffering, our life and our death, our pain and our deliverance, and God is with us in this life and whatever follows.

Death is an illusion, and our suffering is inevitable. Yet I am reminded of the title of a book of prayers from Walter Brueggemann. The prayer I shared at the beginning of this sermon is an excerpt from the collection of prayers Walter Brueggemann has composed over the years. The title of the book is, "Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth." We are all certainly awed by heaven as we all have an idea of what heaven will be like one day, but we are also creatures deeply connected, even rooted in the earth. If we are rooted in the earth, and this is our home, then we must advocate for those who also

share this finite world. We must be rooted in the gospel and the earth as we stand with the unemployed workers in over 25 states who will have their lifelines of financial support cut by September even though they still cannot find work. We must be rooted in the gospel and the earth as corporations snatch the very pennies out of the hands of the poorest people and communities in our world. We must be rooted in the gospel and the earth as we look at the faces of immigrants seeking refuge because our God, our leader, our Savior, Jesus Christ is in the face of those children, families, and people. We must be rooted in the gospel and the earth as our sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, our best friends are deployed to foreign lands to fight in the seemingly endless wars our country fights abroad. Death is an illusion, but what will we do with the time we have been given folks?

In closing, let us remember the words of Isaiah that Bill LaBree read for us last week. When Isaiah lips are branded by the Lord, Isaiah says, "Here, I am, send me." May the mighty, rushing Spirit of the Lord move us and shape us. May the roots of God's life in us strengthen us for the trials ahead of us. May we remember the words of the Psalmist read today, "On the day I cried out, you answered me. You encouraged me with inner strength" (Psalm 138:3 Common English Bible). "Never Backwards. Always Forward." May we keep this mentality as continue to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in our pursuit of co-creating the Kingdom of God. Amen.