

Winners never quit. Quitters never win. Don't quit. Endure to the end and be saved.

The Temple was a visible reminder of the victory of God in this world; God ruled the world from the Temple, and Herod the Great knew how to ride the coat tails of a winner. He transformed the meager monument of Zerubbabel into a true wonder of the world. Huge stones were carefully crafted into building blocks for walls that towered over the city. “Some of these [stones] weighed well over 100 tons, [the largest](#) measuring 44.6 feet by 11 feet by 16.5 feet and weighing approximately 567 to 628 tons, ^{[21][22]} while most were in the range of 2.5 by 3.5 by 15 feet (approximately 28 tons).”¹ As if that weren't enough, Herod had some of the walls painted white and others covered with sheets of gold. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, when the rays of the sun struck those walls, onlookers had to turn away because of the glare.

So we can understand why a bunch of country bumpkins who live in small, one or two room homes constructed out of mud, sand, and stone, are looking around in awe – the walls! The jewels! The gold! Wow, surely this is built to last! Our God rules the world, and He'll never let this beautiful house fall!

Disciples have become tourists, and before Jesus sends them out as apostles (that is – sent ones) he needs to build some capacity in them. Trouble is coming. Foundations will be shaken. And the next step in God's victory in this world requires God's Church to have the spiritual stamina to endure and embrace the possibilities that those difficult days offer so that “oh no!” is transformed into “oh!”

From “Oh No!” to “Oh!”

I appreciated your comments after last Sunday's sermon. In particular, you pointed out the impact of hearing that giving church's tax exempt status could come to an end such that our donations would no longer be tax deductible. “Oh no”

This possibility made your blood boil, but it didn't surprise you. None of you said, “Oh Pastor Dave, where do you come up with these wild ideas?” “Oh Pastor Dave, take away a church's tax exempt status and the tax deduction for charitable giving? That will never happen! ”

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Temple

“Oh no!” That which we have feared will come to pass!

In the same way, none of the disciples challenged Jesus jaw dropping prediction: *Luke 21:6 (NRSV)* “*As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.*” They need look no further than the Roman Centurions stationed around the perimeter of the Temple to see who would do it and how it would be done, and since Israel continually teetered on the brink of rebellion, why the Temple would fall was no mystery.

“Oh no!” That which we have feared will come to pass!

It will come to pass, and that presents new opportunities for us! As Jesus promised, *Luke 21:12 (NRSV)* ¹² “*But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.* *Luke 21:13 (NRSV)* ¹³ *This will give you an opportunity to testify.* *Luke 21:19 (NRSV)* ¹⁹ *By your endurance you will gain your souls.*

The fall of Jerusalem presented the Church with such an opportunity. Up until that point (70 AD), the good news of Jesus was primarily centered in Israel. Paul and Peter had begun the expansion, but Christianity was still primarily a subset of Judaism centered in Israel and other areas of significant Jewish population.

70 AD changed all that. Under the influence of the would be Messiah, Simon bar Kochba, Israel revolted against Rome, and the Emperor was not pleased. Under the leadership of the great general soon-to-be emperor Vespasian, the legions swept through Israel leaving a path of destruction,. When Jerusalem finally fell, the walls came down, the city including the magnificent Temple, burned, and the Romans even filled in a nearby quarry with garbage where some prophet named Jesus had reportedly been buried and raised from the dead.

Rome knew how to win, and when it had won, no one talked trash to the losers like Rome.

"Oh no, that which we have feared has come to pass."

Rome's lack of subtlety gave the Church the chance to escape. Thanks to Jesus' prophecy, they

knew what was coming, and they got out. Thomas went to India. Mark went to Egypt. The Apostles were scattered to the 4 corners of the known world. And Christianity became a world religion; the good news went global, because the the terrible events of 70 AD gave the Early Church new possibilities and new horizons; "oh no" was transformed into "oh."

That same enduring hope is what the 21st century Church is called to as we look at the demographics and cultural trends. The last temptation of the Church may be to trust in the structures we have created; both ecclesiastical and physical. "Look at our building!" "The Presbyterian Church has existed for 500 years! Of course, we'll weather this storm!"

Maybe we will, but John Calvin, who just celebrated his 500th birthday last year, would be the first to chastise us for our idolatry. We profess that the Church is "reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God." Thus, we are always in transition; God is continually doing new things to us and through us. Thus, while these demographics and cultural trends are new, they are merely the latest challenge in our history of rising to challenges and overcoming them! So when circumstances evoke an, "Oh no" from us, get ready! "oh" is on the way!

Spiritual Stamina

Given that possibility, how do we get from "oh no" to "oh?" How do we develop the capacity to respond to the opportunity?

Winners never quit. Quitters never win. Those who endure to the end will save their lives.

I was a psychology major at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The key course in the program was Design and Analysis 1 & 2. We spent a year designing, conducting, and evaluating the results of an experiment; that course gave me a love for probing human behavior. A recent study investigated the relationship between encouragement and endurance. The test subjects (let's call them freshman) were instructed to plunge their hand up to the elbow into a bucket of ice water and hold it for as long as they could. One group of freshman did this in a room with only the experimenter (let's call her a sophomore) present. The other group was invited to bring along some friends to encourage them.

Did the encouragement make a difference? Yes! The encouraged group held their hand in the

water for a statistically significantly longer period of time.

We need each other. Churches that will endure through the challenging times that are before us will be the ones that encourage and support one another. I realize this sounds obvious, but how many conversations have you had with friends and family members who attend churches where there is a negative attitude and plenty of criticism? When we turn on one another rather than turning to one another, we tear down the walls and scatter the stones with our own hands.

Our ability to endure depends upon our attitude. Are we waiting for the other shoe to drop, the axe to fall, the end to come? Or, are we waiting with a sense of expectation? Can we look at the chaos and confusion, see through the smoke and the mirrors, and discern that God is at work and the possibilities for testimony that this turbulent time offers?

That ability; that core capacity is what I am calling spiritual stamina.

The challenges of a post-Christian society are not cause to remember how splendid the old stones were; we need not retreat into a nostalgia for the good old days of what was. Instead, the changing nature of religion in America, the rise of the “nones,” the erosion of our institutional privilege are an opportunity to testify and build spiritual stamina.

Seizing that opportunity is essential to the future with hope that God has in store for Pennside Presbyterian Church. Therefore, encourage one another. A card, an email, a phone call, to someone we know is going through a challenging time means more than words can say. Build their spiritual stamina and yours by reaching out with an encouraging word. Second, encourage yourself! Talk to yourself, but instead of telling the usual tales of woe that center on what is wrong and how nothing ever goes right; talk about what did go right. Celebrate your successes rather than being centered on your failures. Expect God to act and be open to the surprises God has in store.

Pennside Presbyterian Church: winners never quit. Quitters never win. Don't quit. Those who endure to the end will save their lives thanks to spiritual stamina. Amen.