

To the Weary Walking in Darkness

In the name of him with whom all things are possible, dear friend in Christ: Perhaps many of you can relate to this: I have squirreled away throughout the house a number of uncompleted projects. They share two things in common. First, they always started out right. I had a clear vision of what I had in mind for the finished product, what I thought was a workable plan for getting it done, no small amount of enthusiasm that I threw into it initially, and great hope that all would work out well in the end. But then at some point in the process something went wrong. It could be that I came upon an obstacle of some kind, an unforeseen difficulty, a step that was beyond my level of skill or expertise to accomplish. Maybe I'd simply bitten off more than I could chew. Or it could be that I entered a long, monotonous phase in the work that required doing the same arduous task over and over again and I just got tired of it – decided the goal wasn't worth the effort I needed to put into it. It could be that I suddenly realized that I had messed up a critical early step, and to do the job right would mean undoing a lot of the work I'd done, correcting the mistake, and starting over from that point. Funny how feeling foolish, embarrassed, and reluctant to admit a mistake can rob you of your will to proceed. Then there are the projects that simply didn't come together as I had envisioned. The picture in my mind didn't look at all like what was taking shape before me and I decided to give up before it got any worse. There are any number of other problems that may have occurred on some of these projects, but they all resulted in the other thing that they share in common: not only are they not finished now; in all likelihood they never will be. Does this sound familiar to any of you (other than my wife, that is)? If so, I'm sure you understand the point I'm driving at, which is this: it's a whole lot easier to start something than it is to keep on going and finish the job.

And so it is especially with the walk of Christian faith through life. I mean, think about it: most of us here didn't do anything at all to begin the journey. We were blessed to be born of Christian parents who brought us to the Baptismal font when we were babes in their arms. And through the water and life-giving Word we were given the gift of faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our sins were washed away. We were made children of God. The first step – and it was a huge one, moving us from the kingdom of death and darkness to the kingdom of life and light – was all done for us. It was purely by God's grace. I hasten to add that for those of you who came to the faith later in life after a period of instruction, the first step was no less a miraculous work of God. No one makes himself a believer in Jesus. The gift of faith is always that: a gift.

And too, the Lord has provided us the means to continue to strengthen and sustain our faith on the way. That's what the ministry of the Church is all about. Through Word and Sacrament in worship; through ongoing instruction, Sunday school, Bible studies, training in Christian schools; through our private and family devotions; God sees to it that our faith is fed, that it matures, that it comes to bear fruit in acts of loving service. In this regard, our Lord has blessed us amply. There's never been a time in history when God's people have had so available and accessible to them the means by which he sustains them in their holy faith. "Why, Pastor, you make it sound so easy." Yes; and if that's all there were to it, it would be.

But it's not, is it? No, we live out our high and holy faith in a very dark and unholy world. There are obstacles in our way. We face trials and temptations. We suffer setbacks and disappointments. We endure sorrows and losses. We have at times the fiery darts of the devil raining down upon us like an artillery barrage. And in the midst of our afflictions come the other voices: the voice of modern science telling us that what we believe about Jesus is a silly myth.

There is no loving God out there. This is all there is. We are mere accidents of the cosmos, and when we're dead we're dead. The voice of our culture telling us that all religions are equally valid; that all spiritual paths lead to the same happy place. There is no advantage to being a Christian. The voice of false teachers within the church who distort and twist the sacred Scriptures, robbing it of its saving truths. The voice of our own sinful flesh wanting to indulge itself in evil pursuits: lusting, hating, stealing, using others to our own advantage. The voice of the devil telling us that any suffering or hardship we encounter is proof of God's displeasure. The voice of our own guilty consciences telling us that's right – that because of our shameful sins we are beyond redemption and doomed to destruction. There are other voices out there too and they all work together to attempt to drown out the voice of God and destroy our faith in Christ.

Consider the father in today's Gospel, the one who brought his demon afflicted son to Jesus. For years he's lived in anguish, having to witness the son he loves being ravaged by dark forces that render his boy mute and that continually attempt to destroy the child. And he, the father, is helpless to do anything about it. He's got to be wondering if there's a God in this world, and if he's kind and gracious, then why is he allowing this to go on. But then he hears about Jesus. There's a spark of hope. He brings his boy to where he heard Jesus is, only to find he's not there. The man's hope takes a hard hit. But maybe his disciples can help. But no; they can't. They try. But they fail. An angry crowd loudly denounces them as frauds – indicating that Jesus too is a fraud. Strike two to the man's faith. Well, then Jesus shows up. He asks what's going on, and the man explains to him what happened – how the disciples were unable to cast out the unclean spirit. Jesus angrily rebukes all of them for their lack of faith. "Bring the boy to me." He interrogates the father about the boy's condition. And after explaining the father begs him, "*If you can do anything, have compassion and help us.*" "*If you can!* All things are possible for one who believes!" "I do believe. Really, I'm trying. Help my unbelief."

But now put yourself in the man's place. He hears Jesus command the spirit to depart, but the response is not what he expected – a nice peaceful deliverance. No, his beloved child erupts into violent spasms, rolling around on the ground in horrifying convulsive fits. It's the worse the father has ever seen. It goes on for what seems a long time. And then suddenly it stops. The boy lies there as if dead. People start saying that he *is* dead. Strike three. The father has got to be thinking, "I brought my boy here for Jesus to save him, but instead he killed him." At that point any faith he had in Jesus was dead. Little did he know that even death is not a problem for Jesus. And neither is faith that is weak, dying, or dead. To be sure, what the father had in Jesus before this incident was *maybe* faith. *Maybe* Jesus can help me. It was fair weather faith, the kind that only believes when good things happen. And the man's self-generated fair-weather maybe faith had to be put to death so Jesus could replace it with the real thing. You suppose the father had any remaining doubts about Jesus after he took the boy by the hand and delivered him back alive, safe, and sound?

No. Jesus knew exactly what to do in order to give this spiritually worn down man who had so long walked in darkness exactly what he needed to come to complete and unshakable trust in him. He knows how to do it for you too. And that brings me to today's Old Testament lesson, and the words of Jesus spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "The Lord has given me the tongue of those who are thoroughly instructed, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary."

Jesus knows very well that it's a lot easier for us to begin the walk of Christian faith than it is for us to complete it. He knows the trials and afflictions we must face. And he knows how to sustain us in them, to give us the faith to face them. In fact, the trials and afflictions are a

necessary part of refining and purifying our faith in him so that what we have is not only weak, fair-weather, maybe faith. Faith, we know, comes of hearing the Word of God – the Word of God that addresses the very difficulties and doubts we face. And Jesus has a Word of God to strengthen you in all your trials. When you're in the dark, he says "I am the light. Come to me." When you're lost and don't know where to go, he says, "I am the way. Follow me." When you're being attacked by Satan's lies, he says "I am the Truth. Listen to me." When you're facing wants or fears, he says, "I am the Good Shepherd. I care for my sheep and I protect them from harm." When you're overcome with the guilt of your sin, when Satan is telling you there's no salvation for you, he says, "Take and eat, this is my body given for you. Take and drink, this is the blood I shed for the forgiveness of your sins." When you're facing death, your own or someone you love's, he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Who believes in me never dies."

He has a Word of God by which the Spirit can strengthen faith and overcome your doubt and unbelief in every situation. Which tells us that we ought to devote ourselves to being students of the Word. The best way to defend ourselves against all those faith destroying voices we're constantly being exposed to is to spend more time listening to the voice of Jesus, to know what he has to say. And for this we have the example of Jesus himself, who says through Isaiah, "Morning by morning he awakens my ear, to hear as those who are taught." That is to say, Jesus himself was a devoted student of God's Word. Recall that in his earthly ministry he emptied himself and didn't make use of his divine attributes. He had to study and learn the Scriptures just like anyone else. And he did, setting aside time for it each day. The difference is that for him it was like looking in a mirror. He was reading about himself.

And it was by reading the Scripture that he learned of what lie in store for him in his mission as the world's Redeemer, as today's reading continues, "I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting." It was by reading these and other passages like them that Jesus came to understand precisely *how* he would give his life for the life of the world: that he would be mocked, whipped, tortured, and have to face a shameful death on a Roman cross. In these same passages, though, he was being given the perfect faith to face the trials that were to come, knowing that he would be vindicated in the end; as the text goes on to say, "But the Lord helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near."

The way to the cross for Jesus was a dark and weary path, one that was far easier to begin than it was to finish. But finish it he did because his faith was upheld and made perfect by God's Word and Spirit. And when he says, "My face is set like flint" he means, "Bring it on. I'm ready for whatever the enemy throws at me." They are the losers in the end. "They will wear out like a garment; the lowly moth will eat them up."

And this is our confidence: that the Lord Jesus completed his infinitely difficult mission to save us, that he endured the horror and suffering of the cross for us and for our sins, only by the faith given him by God's Word and Spirit is our assurance that we too will be given the trust building Word and the life-giving Spirit to endure the far lesser trials that the Lord in his wisdom sends to purify our faith and remove our doubts and fears. God who began this work in us will bring it to completion. We can rely on him. "Therefore let him who walks weary and in darkness and has no light, trust in the name of the Lord Jesus, and rely on his God." Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!