**WE DO NOT LOSE HEART!**

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Texts: 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:5 and Psalm 130:5-8

 Ray Mansfield was a center for the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 1970s. After his retirement he happened to play a round of golf with a friend in my hometown of Slippery Rock, PA; that friend said that watching Ray swing was almost painful. Ray could barely take the club back and his follow-through was abbreviated due to arthritis as he limped and grimaced his way around the 9-hole course. Ray told my friend that doctors had x-rayed most of his body and found cracks like spider webs across most of his bones from the trauma of playing professional football. He was looking ahead to a future that would include joint replacements, arthritis, limited mobility, and chronic pain; he was not yet 50 years old.

 You don’t have to have been a professional football player to know the toll that time takes on your body. I have two titanium hips that testify to the joy of aging which pales in comparison to one family in the church who might be David and Kay Fry who have had about a dozen joint surgeries across the years. Bodies age, and rarely do they age for the better. Last week on my daily calendar the riddle posed was: “What goes up but never comes down?” The answer as you might have guessed is: “Your age.” And as it goes up, your body breaks down – unless you are Anne Mitchell or Charlie Huppuch who never seem to age at all! There are things we can do to age well – like exercising, eating well, and doing things to stimulate our minds – but we cannot hold off forever the toll of Father Time.

 That is not to say that our futures are grim. There are joys in aging as well: sweet memories, enduring friendships, and the benefits of experience and wisdom gleaned across the years. Modern medicine has more tools in the kit to address those aging issues than they did just a few years ago. And both gray hair and bald heads are now in style! As the proverb says: “*Gray hair is a crown of glory!*” (Prov. 16:31) We who are created in the image of God are called to bear that image well all our days – to age with style and grace if you will – and in so doing to glorify the God who created us so intricately well. Each day is a gift from God, and we are to make the most of our days, even those days when the gift of that day seems to be a gag gift!

In his book *Have a Little Faith*, Mitch Albom shares a story told him by his rabbi friend:

*A minister was visiting a country church, and preaching on a text from the Psalms: “We who are born, are born to die.” He began his sermon with a stirring reminder: “Everyone in this parish is going to die!” The minister looked around. He noticed a man in the front pew, smiling broadly. “Why are you so amused?” he asked. “I’m not from this parish,” the man said. “I’m just visiting my sister for the weekend.*”[[1]](#endnote-1)

The preacher is right: we will all die some day. None of us is immortal. For some people, that reality is a source of anxiety and fear, but we who profess faith in Jesus Christ have been given the gift of resurrection hope with which to face that reality, so that we can stand toe to toe with death without fear – in Paul’s words, *without losing heart* – confident of God’s sure promises in the risen Christ.

 Rusty Garrett was a wonderful member of the church I served in Richmond. She walked with two canes, the result of an illness that had limited her mobility years before. She had made it known that she wanted to live life to the fullest, and when her time came, she wanted to be on her way into Leggett’s Department Store, trip, and be dead before she hit the floor. She told me that the previous week she had indeed been on her way into Leggett’s to do some shopping when she tripped and fell, and on her way down, she said the thought that ran through her mind was, “O Lord, not now!” We don’t get to choose our time, but we do choose how we face that time when death comes knocking at the door – whether it be in a sudden moment or a slow decline.

 In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul urges the people to believe God’s promises and to face that day with courage; you heard it just a moment ago:

*So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.*

Paul is not unrealistic about the lives of the Corinthians. He knows that many of them have difficulties, whether it be from persecution or illnesses or from aging bodies that are wasting away. In the face of that reality, he encourages them to persevere, not because death can be avoided, but because death does not have the last word in our lives. God does! And the hope-filled promises that God offers make the burdens of this life pale in comparison. They are promises of a better life to come, what he characterizes as a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. That solid home far exceeds the perishable tent in which we live now – these bodies that are prone to break down and leak in places from time to time and require constant repair. The heavenly dwelling of which he speaks is glorious, and the promise of it is enough to help us persevere in the present, regardless of what challenges may come. In joys and in sorrows, in sickness and in health, in life and in death, we can boldly assert in the words of the old hymn: *It is well with my soul!*

 “*The one who has prepared us for this very thing is God*,” writes Paul. It is God who does that good soul work in us, that building of confident hope and faith that prepare us for whatever challenges may come in life or in death. When this Covenant Church was first organized in 1959, folks gathered on the second floor of an auto body shop on North Augusta Street for worship. Just outside the Great Hall near the elevator here, you can see a picture of those charter members outside that building – with some particularly stunning hats, I might note – and the caption below the picture is the name of that first meeting place for Covenant Presbyterian Church: *The Body and Soul Shop*. Auto body work was done on the lower level; soul work was done on the second level where the church met to worship God and grow in faith. That soul work is at the heart of who we are as a church in this place and around the world. For in life and in death, in Staunton, VA and in Staunton, England and in New Stanton, PA, God is with us and it is well with our souls!

 It is well with our souls because we see beyond the fragile nature of these bodies and this earthly home to what is not seen – that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, that Paul speaks of, that place to which Jesus says he is going to make a place for us. That promise gives us courage to face whatever diagnosis or mishap or tragedy or peril or political cataclysm may come. For, as Paul writes to the Romans: *nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*. Henry van Dyke, author of *The Other Wise Man* that some of you may recall from past Christmas Eves here, captures that sense of assurance well in these words:

*I am standing upon the seashore. A sloop at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength. I stand and watch her until at length she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other. Then someone at my side says: ‘There she is gone!’ ‘Gone where?’ Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side and she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port. Her diminished size is in me, not in her. And just at the moment when someone at my side says: ‘There she is gone!’ there are other eyes watching her coming, and other voices ready to take up the glad shout: ‘Here she comes!’ And that is dying.*

 It is God who stands with us on this shore and God who welcomes us to that distant port, for in life and in death we belong to God. So, do not lose heart! Do not fret that you are not as young as you used to be or that your body is failing you in places or that you are in need of some replacement parts. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure. You cannot yet see it, but one day you will. And how glorious it will be! How glorious it will be! Amen

1. Rabbi Albert Lewis as told by Mitch Albom, *Have a Little Faith*, Hyperion: New York, 2009, p.231 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)