

Happy Mother's Day! I want to start with a story about my mom. One evening when I was six or seven, we all went to the fair. As little boys are prone to do, I wandered away from my family and, after a while, realized I was all by myself. There was a huge crowd, and my mom was nowhere to be found. As you can imagine, it was a moment of despair for me. I was alone, afraid, and not sure what to do. So I froze, and maybe even started to cry (that part is a little fuzzy!) By the grace of God, a fair worker came over to me, found out I was alone, and took me to a security trailer. After what seemed like an eternity, though it was only 15 minutes, the door opened, and I saw a sight for sore eyes. You wouldn't be able to tell by looking at me, but we have curly hair in my family. And in the 80's, mom wore it big, and wore it bleach blonde. There were stairs that led up to the trailer, and as mom walked up them and her head came into view, it was like a sunrise! I yelled out "Mom!", ran to her, and all was right with the world. Mom was with me.

When we "go" for the Lord, there are times where it can feel like we've gotten separated, leaving us alone, afraid, and not sure what to do. It is a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. When we get in those moments, we'll be tempted to freeze, compromise, doubt, despair. But this morning, we are going to be reminded of a promise God has always made to those who faithfully follow him. It is a promise God gives freely and regularly, and my guess is many of us need to hear that promise again today. We're going to be in Acts 18 this morning where Paul has made his way from Athens to Corinth. But before we get there, I want to show you his condition as he entered that city. Paul reflected on that in his first letter to them after he left.

[1 Corinthians 2:1-3] And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.

Paul has had tremendous success in his ministry, but he's also faced resistance everywhere he's gone, particularly in Lystra, Philippi, and Thessalonica. And now he makes his way from the intellectual capital of Athens to the commercial and immorality capital of Corinth. He's left Timothy and Silas in Macedonia, so he comes alone, discouraged, weary, and fearful.

[Acts 18:1-10] After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. ⁵ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." ⁷ And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titus Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you,

**and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.”
11 And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.**

Paul makes his way to Corinth and goes through his usual approach of starting in the synagogues. By God’s grace, he meets Priscilla and Aquila, whom we’ll talk about more next week, and many come to faith, including two prominent men. But he is also opposed with hostility and reviled, which is the word blasphemed. He is slandered. Paul appears done and reacts by shaking out his robes, a sign of cutting off fellowship. There is no indication he’s sinned here, but it’s clear he’s lost hope and is ready to move on. **But then grace appears.** In the midst of this discouragement, Jesus renews a promise to Paul. “I am with you.” It’s a promise given by God dozens and dozens of times in Scripture.” **I believe God gives us that promise so often because we need to hear it so regularly.** That may be you this morning, and my prayer is that, as we talk about three ways Jesus’ inseparable presence sustains us in the darkest of moments, you’ll leave here this morning encouraged, emboldened, and at rest.

If Jesus is with you, you have nothing to fear.

Paul has a lot to be afraid of. He’s been rejected by his people everywhere he goes, and his physical safety has been threatened multiple times. But there is a command that occurs over 100 times in scripture, often accompanying this promise, and the command is “Do not fear.” I’ve never thought God meant it’s wrong to experience fear. I believe the command is to take that captive to Christ and not let fear master you. Because what does fear do? It makes you freeze.

Jeff Harmon, our Communications Director, has a tree house in his backyard. Over the past few weeks, he has tried to get his daughter, Audrey, to jump to him from it. In the beginning she was terrified, and she froze every time she got up there. But something happened. Jeff kept telling her “I’m right here. I got you. You don’t have to be afraid.” So one day, Audrey came up with an idea. She would start at the first step in the tree house and work her way up. And what she discovered was her dad was with her, and she had nothing to be afraid of, and she made it all the way to the top. Now, she wants to jump to her dad every day, and Jeff has the chiropractor bills to prove it.

Following Jesus comes with risk. We turn our entire lives over to him, exchange our will for his, and step into a world hostile to the Gospel and hostile to the Lord, and we will encounter fear-inducing moments. **He’s telling us to jump. He’s with us and he’s got us.** The promise is not that nothing bad will happen. He keeps Paul from being harmed here, but Paul will be one day be martyred. The promise is that he’s got you no matter the outcome, and his presence will overcome the fear that will try to make you freeze.

Scripture says God is love and Scripture says perfect love casts out fear. When you take your fears to the present, perfect love that is with you in Jesus, you are reminded that love came for you, love died for you, love saved you, love went through everything you might experience yourself, love sustains you, love won’t let anything happen to you that he doesn’t allow and can’t use, love secured eternity for you, and love is coming back to get you. And every faithful step we take in the midst of fear, Jesus meets us there and says “I’m here. I’ve got you. You have nothing to be afraid of.” And then we take a bigger step, and a bigger step, and a bigger step. So what are

you afraid of?? If it's persecution, rejection, FOMO, failure, would you be honest with God about that this week, take it to Jesus, and let his love overcome it and keep you going.

If Jesus is with you, God's purposes will be fulfilled.

We talk a lot about purpose here, but it wouldn't be worth much if it could be stopped by external resistance. Paul hits a wall here, and when you hit a wall, doubt can set in. Doubt that God is able and willing, and doubt that you have what it takes. But Jesus says "I am with you. Keep going. Go on speaking and do not be silent. Keep living out the purpose for which I sent you." Why? Because Jesus is at work ahead of Paul. There are people in that city who are his people. Jesus uses a word that is normally used for the people Israel. Jesus wants to use Paul to bring them to saving faith in Christ. **God's purpose for your life will be fulfilled because God is the one who will fulfill it. Our job is to faithfully cooperate.** We've seen it time and time again in this series that God is at work ahead of his people. We see it again here.

Frankly, I had a few of those moments as we tried to navigate our way through the pandemic. I've asked the questions "What is church? Who is our church? God, are you in this? Lord, do I have what it takes?" But God continues to encourage me. I have seen him move, change hearts, draw people to himself (four baptisms starting today), bring new people, renew our passion for him and energy to live out what he's called us to, and I'm so moved, I'm so in, I'm so hopeful, and I can't wait to see what he's going to do next. **We get a front row seat to watch God work.**

As you think about going, what barriers do you see? Provision, resistance, indifference, ability, direction, resources? Remember, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus sent out his disciples and the 72 by saying "Take nothing with you." Utter dependence. "I will provide for you as you go." Acts begins with "And you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses." God promises the provision of himself first, then gives our assignment. Difficulty does not mean God is unable or that the mission is threatened. It is a reminder that God is ultimately the one who is going to have to work it out. And he will. **If he is with you, you can't be stopped. If he is with us, the Church can't be stopped.**

If Jesus is with you, you're never alone.

I wasn't sure if I should put this one first or last, but I like saving the best news for last, and this is the best news. I love to think that Paul just preached to Athenians that God is near, and now he gets to experience it for himself. God is with him, and that's been God's heart since the beginning. Adam and Eve walked intimately with God in the Garden, God told Noah and Abraham "I am with you", he told Israel "I am with you", Jesus is called Immanuel, which means "God with us", while giving the Great Commission, Jesus said "I will be with you until the end of the age", God's Spirit is in us and with us, and at the end of it all, "The dwelling place of God is **with man**. He will dwell **with them**, and they will be his people, and God himself will be **with them** as their God." God created us to have an intimate relationship with him, Jesus died on a cross to fix what broke that relationship, and there is an eternity ahead for those who have placed their faith in him to be with him forever. If Jesus is with you, you're never alone.

We have been in a season of isolation that none of us could have anticipated. In those times where it hits you hard, remember there is one who calls you beloved, redeemed, chosen, accepted, friend, child, bride, who says, “You are mine”. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. He is always there. **If you are a follower of Jesus you belong to him and if you belong to him you get all of him, all the time, for all time, and there is no better news than that.**

Jesus fulfilled those promises to Paul. The Jews in Corinth accused him of breaking Roman law and brought him before a tribunal with the proconsul Gallio.

[Acts 18:14-16] ¹⁴ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. ¹⁵ But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.” ¹⁶ And he drove them from the tribunal.

Gallio dismissed their charges, set Paul free and, in the process, legitimized Christianity in the Roman Empire. This is like an appeals court that has precedent with other courts. That tolerance would cease in AD 64 when Nero accused the Christians of burning down Rome but, for the time being, Paul had cover, and he faithfully ministered in Corinth for 1.5 years. But none of that would have happened had Jesus not met Paul in this moment to love, encourage, and sustain him.

If you are a follower of Jesus, there is no moment in your life where God is not with you. Whatever comes, go first to him. There’s no better way to end this service than with a time of communion, a time to celebrate our union with Christ and what he did to accomplish it.