

Twenty-First Sunday of Pentecost
October 24, 2004
2 Tim. 2:8-13
(Festival of Favorite Hymns)

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Be Faithful to Your Faithful Savior

1. Suffering can tempt us to disown Jesus
2. Those who remember Jesus will reign with him

NIV 2 Timothy 2:8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel,⁹ for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.¹¹ Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him;¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us;¹³ if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was midnight and the two cellmates were not yet asleep. Pain was making sleep difficult. Both men had been flogged until their backs were a landscape of lacerated flesh. After the whipping, they had been taken to prison where the jailer assigned them to the inner cell and locked their feet in stocks. Their crime? These two men were Christians who had used the power of Jesus to exorcise a demon from a fortune-telling slave girl. When the demon left, the ability to tell fortunes did too. The owners of the slave girl, angry at their loss of income, hauled the two men before the local magistrates and the magistrates sentenced them to flogging and prison. What did the other prisoners hear at midnight from that dark inner cell? Not the curses of those who believe they were unjustly imprisoned. Not the sobbing of broken men. Not even just the moaning of the injured. They heard the sound of two men singing hymns. The two men were the apostle Paul and his traveling companion, Silas, and after a long day of being manhandled and mistreated, they sang hymns to praise God and strengthen each other.

The setting for our hymn-sing this morning is much more comfortable. But it's fitting that our epistle lesson appointed for this Sunday of the church year includes the apostle Paul quoting what appears to be an early Christian hymn. *"If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself."* I don't know if this was one of the hymns that Paul and Silas sang as they sat there in that dungeon in Philippi,

but it would have been appropriate. The hymns of the Christian church have always played an important role in comfort-ing and strengthening believers. This hymn and the words of Paul that accompany it encourage believers to **Be Faithful to Our Faithful Savior**. It reminds us 1] that suffering can tempt us to disown Jesus, but it also assures us 2] that those who remember Jesus will reign with him.

1. Suffering can tempt us to disown Jesus

This letter, 2 Timothy, is the last word we have the apostle Paul. He wrote it from prison in Rome, where he was, as he says here, "*chained like a criminal*." Once again his only crime was preaching the gospel of Jesus so that people could hear God's message of forgiveness through faith in Christ and go to heaven. That's why he was suffering once again. Such frequent mistreatment would surely have broken Paul's resolve and caused him to walk away from the gospel if he had not been convinced that his Savior Jesus was always faithful to him. He expresses that conviction near the end of this letter when he describes how everyone deserted him as his first court appearance in Rome. Yet he says, "**But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength.**" (4:17) He goes on, "**The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.**" (4:18)

We do have a faithful Savior. The prospect of leaving his Father's side to come to this once-perfect, now fallen planet was anything but delightful. Yet Jesus did it without complaint. In faithfulness Jesus spent three decades in near obscurity, obeying every law that an ordinary Jew was obligated to keep. Each time he said no to temptation, Jesus was being faithful to his mission and faithful for us. Jesus knew in advance what his final journey to Jerusalem was going to involve, yet he would not be deterred. He didn't let Peter or Satan or anyone else talk him out of the cross and the suffering that awaited him. Instead, despite the opposition of sinful men, he endured the cross, scorning its shame. After he'd been raised from the dead, Jesus appeared to the very disciples who had denied and deserted him. The first word out of his mouth when he met with them was "Peace." He equipped them to be his witnesses and promised to be with them. He's still demonstrating his faithfulness to us. Day after day he provides for our physical welfare. As often as we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness. He has the power to do this because his death at Calvary was the atoning sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of the whole world.

But if faithfulness is the way of Jesus, it's not the way of fallen human beings. There were times when Paul didn't just feel alone; he actually was alone. His companions in the gospel were either far away or they abandoned Paul and the gospel he proclaimed. In his letter here Paul names the names of some of those who proved faithless: Hermogenes and Hymenaeus, Phygelus and Philetus, and Alexander and Demas. I don't know who these men were. I only see their names here in 2 Timothy. But their names have a sobering effect on me, because they remind me that every one of us has the potential to lapse into the same

faithlessness of which they were guilty. That's why the hymn Paul quotes has this cautionary line that says, "*If we disown him, he will disown us.*"

Disowning Jesus sounds pretty dramatic, doesn't it? And probably rare, too, right? But do you remember how easily the disciple Peter got to that point? He didn't heed the warnings of Jesus. He put himself in a place where there was going to be a strong temptation to deny Jesus and he went there trusting his own power to see him through. And before he knew it, he could hear himself saying that he didn't know Jesus and punctuating his lie with oaths and curses. But I'm no better. You aren't either. It doesn't take the fear of a brutal beating or death to cause us to act as if we don't know Jesus. All it takes sometimes is the fear of ridicule or a strong temptation at a time when we're particularly vulnerable—and there we are: numbered with those who've disowned Jesus.

These are the times when the rest of this little hymn becomes so comforting to us. Paul quotes the last line of the hymn: "*If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.*" Faithfulness is woven into the character of Jesus. Even our most hard-hearted acts of unfaithfulness won't change who he is. Knowing that we have a faithful Savior prompts habitual sinners like us to remember that "*if we died with him, we will also live with him.*" We died with Jesus, according to Paul in Romans 6, when we were buried with Christ in baptism. In that simple act in which water and the Word were applied to us, we came to share in Jesus' death for sin. So we confess our sins and go back again to what that faithful Savior told us when we were baptized: Your sins are forgiven.

This letter was written by the apostle Paul to his young coworker Timothy. Paul senses that his time on this earth is growing short and so he uses this letter to provide Timothy with some final guidance, cautions, and encouragement. He encourages Timothy to "remember Jesus Christ" and reminds him that those who endure with Christ will reign with him.

2. Those who remember Jesus will reign with him

Paul opened this section by telling Timothy, "*Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.*" To remember Jesus means to acknowledge and confess Jesus. It's the opposite of disowning him. These words are actually an early forerunner of the creeds we use here in church. Paul is urging Timothy and us to confess Jesus as the Christ, that is, the one God anointed to be our King and Savior. The reference to King David reminds us that we confess Jesus not only to be our God but also be a true human being. He is God and man in one divine person. It was by his appearing on this earth, by his meritorious work as our Substitute, that we obtain the salvation and the eternal glory that God had planned for us. All those who endure in this confession, that the man Jesus is the Christ, our Savior, will reign with Jesus in eternal glory when this life is over. As we trust in Jesus, we can say just what Paul wrote toward the end of this letter. Facing the prospect of his death, he confessed, "**I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the**

faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Tim. 4:7-8) Those who endure with Jesus will reign with him.

But until that day when our status as the members of God’s royal family becomes visible, we will have to struggle with our sinful weaknesses and endure the onslaughts of Satan and his allies. That’s where our hymns can be a great asset. They can be a great source of strength for us and as we sing them we encourage each other. You may know that when Martin Luther was troubled by despairing thoughts, he would sometimes say to his colleagues, “Come, let’s sing the 46th Psalm,” and what they would then sing was “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” When John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was on a voyage to America from England, some of the other passengers were Moravians from Germany. The hymn-singing of the Moravians made a deep impression on Wesley, especially one day when a huge wave washed over their ship and shattered the mainsail. Right at that time, below decks, the Moravians had just begun their service with a hymn. They looked up at hearing all the commotion but then calmly kept on singing. Later John Wesley translated one of the Moravian hymns into English. It’s “Jesus, Your Blood and Righteousness.” In 1757, the Prussian army under Frederick the Great stood face to face with the Austrian army which outnumbered them 3 to 1. Just before the armies engaged, the Prussians began singing a stanza from the hymn “O God, My Faithful God.” One of Frederick’s subordinates asked him if he wanted him to stop the singing. Frederick replied, “No, let it be; with such men God will certainly give me the victory. Later, when the bloody battle ended in his favor, he is reported to have said, “My God, what a power religion has.” And more than that, people we knew, people we loved, went to be with their Lord with words of familiar hymns on their lips or sounding in their ears: “I’m But a Stranger Here, Heaven Is My Home,” “I Know that My Redeemer Lives,” and “Abide with Me.”

I believe this is my 11th Festival of Favorite hymns here at St. Peter. I’m sure you’ve noticed, as I have, that our list of favorites is not real volatile. It tends to stay mostly the same year after year. This year the list of ten favorite hymns is exactly the same as last year. But that’s fine. The hymns that you like have this in common: they speak of loving Savior, Jesus Christ, who faithfully forgives and defends us. To sing such truths brings praise to God and strengthens us and our fellow Christians so that we’re better able to be faithful to our faithful Savior. Amen.