

HELP ME MAKE IT THROUGH THE NIGHT

(09/29/19)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 18:1-2, 41-45
Galatians 6:7-10
Luke 11:9-10

“Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.” (Galatians 6:9)

Have you ever gone through a really difficult time? During this difficult period in your life, did you wonder how long you could hang on, how long you could keep going? Were you tempted to give up, to quit, to let go of something that you knew was very important?

Perhaps you were (or are) struggling with the adjustment to a new life following the death of a loved one. Life is not the same as it was before, and you wonder if it is worth living. And yet you go on, hoping that the feelings will return, hoping that you can recover some of the joy of life, hoping the deadness in your soul will lift.

Perhaps you are struggling with a serious illness. You might have to go for chemotherapy or dialysis. You may be experiencing chronic pain that beats you into the ground. You may have to adjust to a life with serious limitations.

Perhaps you are struggling with an addiction. You know that it is destroying your life. You also know what you need to do. You have to make a commitment to remain sober or clean or resist the urge to gamble just one day at a time. You have to go to meetings, even though they are not always exciting. You have to commit to the life-long process of recovery because you know that if you don't go to these meetings you will die. You will literally die.

A member of our church family has been clean now for four years and is finally going back to college and creating a future for himself. We are tremendously happy, and we have tremendous respect for that young man! We are humbled when we realize what a difficult journey this has been for him and for his family.

There are times in life when the road before us is difficult. We hope that if we are faithful to the challenge that life has set before us, the burden that life has placed upon our shoulders (or that we may have placed upon our own shoulders), the burden will be

lifted. It may not always be lifted, but as we get stronger and healthier, as we utilize the resources of our religious faith, it may become easier to carry.

In response to the television series that Ken Burns has created on the history and significance of country music, I recently reset one of stations on my car radio to a country station. The other day I happened to catch one of my favorite songs.

The song, “Help Me Make It Through the Night,” has been sung by Elvis Presley, Willie Nelson, and Sammi Smith, among others. I like the one by Sammi Smith the best, though all of them are great. You will never hear me say an unkind word about Elvis or Willie. I may pretend to be highly cultured and a lover of classical music, but I confess that at least a part of my soul is country.

It’s a love song, sung by either a man or a woman to his/her loved one. It speaks of darkness, depression. There apparently was a fight; it’s not clear who was right and who was wrong. It can’t be sorted out; it just has to be endured. The singer asks his/her companion to just “help me make it through the night.” Consider the words:

*Come and lay down by my side
Til the early mornin' light.
All I'm takin' is your time;
Help me make it through the night.
I don't care who's right or wrong.
I won't try to understand.
Let the devil take tomorrow,
But tonight I need a friend.
Yesterday is dead and gone,
And tomorrow's out of sight,
And it's sad to be alone.
Help me make it through the night.*

There are times when we need a friend, someone who cares, someone who can help us make it through the night. There are times when we need a sense of presence, someone to stay with us “‘til the early morning light.” In this morning’s hymn, we voiced our belief that we have this friend in Jesus, that no matter where we go in this life, we are never alone; God is right there with us.

Every Advent season we reflect on the themes of hope, peace, love, joy, and light. Hope generally comes first in the series. Hope gives us staying power. It holds forth the

promise of a better tomorrow, and it actually pulls us into a better future. It reminds us that no matter how dark the night may be, the dawn is sure to follow.

I recently heard a story. Since I didn't have the good sense to write it down immediately, I have to sort of reconstruct it. This, by the way, is apparently a true story.

A man in the prime of his life (whenever that is!) was involved in a tremendous motor vehicle accident. Many of his bones were broken; some were shattered. One of his lungs was punctured and he was bleeding internally. He had suffered a concussion and there was bleeding in his brain. He was in really tough shape. He was holding onto life by a thread. And it was a thin thread at that.

The physicians had done everything they could. Now they and the man's family just had to wait.

The man drifted in and out of consciousness. There were fleeting moments when he knew there were other people in the room, when he could hear and at times even understand voices. From what he could glean from the voices in the room, he knew he was in serious trouble.

Night was falling. The attending physician was ending his shift and was preparing to go home. Before he left, he and the attending nurse stood over the man's bed. They said a little prayer for the man who had been entrusted into their care.

The man, drifting in and out of consciousness, had a vague sense of their presence and their prayer. Then he heard something that broke through in a way he could understand. He distinctly heard the physician addressing the nurse. The physician said, "If he can just make it through the night, if he can just make it until morning, he will live. But he *has* to make it through tonight."

At that moment, the man decided that he could do this. He was going to make it through that night or die trying! And he did! The following morning, he took a turn for the better. The physicians and nurses were amazed!

When I heard the story, I had a sneaky suspicion that the physician knew what he was doing. He knew the road to recovery for this man was going to be long and arduous. He knew that the man was going to have to go one step at a time, one day at a time. But none of this would happen if he gave up and let go. So, the physician cleverly challenged him to give it everything he had to just make it through one night, just to make it to the

dawn. And the man, who received the challenge, rose to the occasion. He summoned everything within him and willed himself to live until dawn. And he made it!

Of course, I may be wrong. Maybe the physician was just telling the truth about the man's condition and prognosis. Maybe the physician was using the power of the placebo effect on his patient, and maybe he wasn't. It doesn't matter. What matters is that it worked.

Every communion Sunday we remember how Jesus tells his followers,

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Jesus doesn't tell us that we just have to knock once, ask once, and look around a little. I think he means that we may have to knock until our knuckles bleed. We may have to pray until we are hoarse. We can't give up the search, the spiritual journey. The promise, the gift is to those who persevere, who keep their eye on the prize.

The passage from 1 Kings speaks to this same basic truth. God has visited a drought on Israel. Ahab knows that his kingdom is in serious trouble. It has not rained for three years and everything is dying. Ahab has not been favorably disposed toward Elijah and Elijah's God. However, he agrees to set up a showdown between Elijah and the priests of Baal, a contest that Elijah wins.

The point is not that Elijah won the contest and slaughtered the priests of Baal. The point is that God promised Elijah that if he remained faithful the rains would return. So, Elijah prays to God. He prays again and again. Even when there is no sign of rain, no reason to hope that the drought will end, Elijah continues to hope; he continues to trust; *and he continues to pray*. Elijah just won't quit!

Elijah tells his servant to go to the top of Mt. Carmel and look toward the sea. The servant does what the prophet has commanded; he returns to report that there is no sign of rain. Elijah tells him to go back. Again, and again, the servant searches the skies, but there is no sign of rain. There isn't a cloud in sight.

During this time of trial, it would have been easy for Elijah to be disheartened. Perhaps God's promise was an empty promise. But Elijah doesn't give up. He continues to hope, to trust, to pray, and to wait expectantly.

On the seventh trip to the top of the mountain the servant sees something. He tells Elijah, “Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea.” The sky slowly becomes dark with clouds and the land is blessed with a torrential downpour of life-giving rain!

How do you know when things are going to turn around for you? The sign of the fulfillment of God’s promise may be small. It may escape your notice unless you look carefully. But sometimes, if you look carefully within yourself, you can see that something has shifted—just a little bit. This doesn’t happen all by itself. We have to trust in God’s promises. We have to utilize the resources that are there for us. And we just can’t quit, even when the going is difficult.

The apostle Paul challenges us to meet the difficulties of life with faith when he tells us, “So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.” We will reap the harvest—*if we do not give up!*

I don’t know what burden you carry or that you will carry in the foreseeable future, but I do know one thing. I know what scripture tells us about the importance of faith. I know what scripture tells us about the importance of hope. I know what scripture tells us about the importance of perseverance. And I know that scripture assures us that whatever we are going through, we are not going through it alone.

I don’t know what burden you carry, but I do know that you have more resources within you, resources for healing, resources for living life fully, than you realize. When the night is dark, you need to wait patiently and prayerfully for the dawn. You *can* make it through the night. Then you can make it through the next day. And then the next, and then the next until you find yourself in a very different place.

You don’t have to do it alone. But you do have to do it. It all starts with the determination to make it through the night.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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