



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Standing on the Promises¹

John 14:8-17

A sermon by William M. Klein

31 May 2020

8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. 12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. 13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. 15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. (Jn. 14:8-17 NRSV)

1

On one level putting this sermon together was very difficult. I thought about it and thought about it...and kept putting off sitting myself down in front of the keyboard.

You might think that in the course of 25 years I would have said whatever I wanted to say...and you may well think, surely he has. But there are still so many things I'd wanted to say before my time as your pastor was through. So putting this sermon together was difficult.

On another level, though, it was simple...simple because all I really wish to do is to express my gratitude...to say, "Thank you."

2

One of the sillier things I've done through the years is ponder sermon titles. Years ago at a Session meeting one of the Ruling Elders, Chuck Phillips, began berating me about the length of a certain sermon title. The rest of the Elders and I looked at each other wondering what was up with Chuck. He said, "You need to make your sermon titles shorter." When I asked why, he replied. "I was driving down Main Street the other day and looked over to read the sermon title on the marquee. It was so long that I ran into the car ahead of me. You are responsible for my accident. Make your sermon titles shorter." He then broke out laughing...and so did everyone in that room.

I have a file of sermon titles that have ear-wormed their way into my brain from things I've read, from movies and television shows, from music, from random comments I've heard people make. Who knows, I may yet make use of some of those sermon titles.

But one title I've always wanted to use here but never quite found the right occasion came from a hand-painted sign I saw one day when I was in high school. I was in the car with my family of origin, driving toward Smith Mountain Lake. The sign was leaning against a post at the end of a driveway on highway 40 between Rocky Mount and

Penhook...and it read, "Ever who stole my chainsaw is a ..."² I have wanted to preach a sermon and title it, "Ever Who." As much as anything I wanted to have that sermon title on the church marquee and watch people's reaction as they walk or drive by and see it. Oh well...it was not to be.

3

Today is Pentecost Sunday...one of the handful of high holy days in the church. Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost are the big three.

Fifty days after Easter the disciples, who at this point numbered around 120 people (according to Acts 1:15), were gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot) - or Pentecost, as it came to be known in later generations. This was the third of the three great festivals of Judaism...a joyful festival in which the first-fruits of the harvest were given to God.³

The 120 disciples were in one place when, without warning, there was a sound like a strong wind, a gale force - no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.⁴

People from all over were in Jerusalem...and they heard these disciples speaking in their own languages. And they were filled with a fearful awe and wonder. What power was this at work in these Galileans...these people suddenly and fluently speaking foreign tongues? What, they wondered, did this mean? And what were they to make of the gospel message they were hearing?

Luke, the writer of the Acts of the Apostles, tells us how the people reacted to the Spirit of God at work in the 120 disciples. Luke does not tell us how the 120 reacted. What do you think they thought? When they found themselves speaking in languages they did not know, what did they think? Were they frightened? Were they delighted? Were they afraid of what might happen next? Were they afraid what was happening might stop?

Or, at some level, did they understand that what was happening to them was the fulfillment of what Jesus had promised? He had said he would be with them always, to the end of the age.⁵ He had said God would send them "another Advocate" who would be with them forever.⁶ Jesus told his disciples that through this Advocate, this Holy Spirit, he would be with them. When they would ordinarily turn to Jesus for advice or comfort or clarification...they would be able to turn to the Holy Spirit once Jesus was gone from them. They would be able to turn to the Holy Spirit and expect to receive what they would have received from Jesus.

4

From where we stand we can look down the ages to that Spirit-filling moment. We have the benefit of seeing how those disciples came to trust God's gift...and how they entrusted themselves to the Spirit's guidance. And we can see that those first disciples were more trusting at some times than others.

As we set our feet into the great river of faith we know we have times when we allow ourselves to perceive the Spirit's comfort and guidance...and times when we do not do it so well...times when we are frightened.

You and I, no less than the first 120 disciples, find living to be beautiful and delightful...but also troubling and sometimes terrifying. We are terrified by the way an

accident or an intentional act of terror or an illness or a pandemic can sever us from those people dearest to us. Being contingent, finite creatures in an unpredictable kingdom annoys, frightens, and grates upon us.⁷

Jesus knew this about life. It was how he experienced life himself. And he knew wishful thinking was not very useful in the long run. No amount of wishful thinking was going to keep us from being out of control.

What he could do, though, was to give us something to hold onto. That something was a promise. That something was the assurance that though we will be out of control, God is not. God loves us...and nothing that happens in this "out of control world" can make God stop loving us. Jesus urged us to trust in God and in God's love more than the good things or the frightening things that happen to us and in us.

5

After thinking about the biblical passages for today an old-time gospel hymn began bubbling up out of my past: "Standin' On the Promises." Why this hymn, I wondered? Then it occurred to me it deals with *fear*.

The hymn writer, having been a vigorous, athletic sort, at age 30 developed a heart condition physicians could not correct. Fear swept over him...but so did God's promise to be with him always.

Listen to the words of the hymn's second verse:

*Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
by the living Word of God I shall prevail,
standing on the promises of God.*

As I stand here the last day of my time as your pastor...I am keenly aware that I am fearful...fearful of what it will be like to not be your pastor... fearful of what comes next for me and for Deb. But as real as my fears may be, what fear I have is eclipsed by gratitude...gratitude for the life we have shared all these years...gratitude for work God has given us to do together. We are in the 25th year of this pastoral relationship...which means a whole lot of baptisms, confirmations, marriages, ordinations, and burials...a whole lot of church suppers and Session meetings and youth trips and conversations.

So, yes, gratitude overshadows any fear I have about what is next for us. And I do not fear for you folks at all. For I truly am confident God will continue to lead LexPres in new and faithful ways. In fact, I'm eager to see what God will do next with and through this congregation.

On this Pentecost Sunday "when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail" - when your pastors of a quarter century bid you farewell - when the threat of the coronavirus destabilizes the world as we know it - or as the psalmist put it, when it seems as "though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult" ...we will not be afraid. For we are standing on the promises of God. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Hymn, *Standing on the Promises*, text & music by R. Kelso Carter (1849-1928).

1. Standing on the promises of Christ my King,
through eternal ages let his praises ring;
glory in the highest, I will shout and sing,
standing on the promises of God.

Refrain:

Standing, standing, standing on the
standing on the promises of Christ my Savior;
standing, standing,
I'm standing on the promises of God.

2. Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
by the living Word of God I shall prevail,
standing on the promises of God.

² The word the guy used on his sign was "bastard."

³ Bartlett, David L. & Taylor, Barbara Brown, ed. 2010. *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Vol. 3. Louisville: WJK Press, 15. *Pentecost* ("Pfingsten" in German), is the Greek for "the fiftieth" (day after Easter).

⁴ Peterson, Eugene H. 2002. *The Message*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1969.

⁵ See Matthew 28:20.

⁶ We know the Advocate by a number of titles – including Paraclete, Counselor, Friend, Spirit of Truth, and Holy Spirit.

⁷ Hauerwas, Stanley. 2010. "Learning from others," in *Christian Century*, May 18 issue. Chicago: Christian Century Foundation, 34. No matter how much we try and pretend, our lives are contingent, which is to say they are out of our control. We may want excitement in our lives...but we want controlled excitement, excitement within relatively safe limits.