

Second Reading: Philippians 3:17--4:1

Although Paul's devotion to Christ has caused him to be persecuted, he does not regret the course he has taken. Writing from prison, he expresses confidence in a glorious future and encourages other Christians to follow in his footsteps.

¹⁷Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. ^{4:1}Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Gospel: Luke 13:31-35

Neither Herod's plotting nor Jerusalem's resistance to maternal love will deter Jesus from his sacrificial mission.

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to [Jesus,] "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³²He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' "

During my senior year at high school, one day my English teacher came up to me and said because you haven't missed any spelling words this year, as a reward you do not have to take the next test, in fact you can be the one who gives it to the class. However, she said, you need to be firm in your directions and firm in your pronunciations. I said, "Great!" We started the spelling words test, probably about twenty-five or thirty of them, and about a third of the way in, the next word was "capital". Someone raised their hand, and I said "yes", remembering to stand firm, and they said which one? Which word "capital" do you mean, since both were on the test. I responded: "the one with the letter 'a' toward the end of it." Needless to say, that was the last spelling word I was allowed to give.

There was another time, when I was a little younger that I started umpiring little league baseball. I was not very confident about it, in fact, I was downright scared to death when I started. When I was given my brief instruction on what to do as an umpire, they said you must remain firm in your decision. You should not change a call once you make it. Just a couple of games in, I was umpiring the first the baseline when a kid hit a ground ball to the shortstop who momentarily bobbled it and then threw wildly to first base. The first baseman ran and picked up the ball, and the runner ran through the base turned toward second in a quick pivot and ran back to the first base bag. On his way back toward first, the first baseman took his glove over and tagged him, and I called him out. Now the runner was clearly safe, and while technically he turned toward second, he made no real motion to head there, he was safe. However, I had made my call and I thought to myself I need to stand firm. The first base coach went crazy on me. The manager came out the dugout to argue but I had signaled him out, and so out he was, even though he was safe. I wanted to

crawl into a hole, but all I can remember in that moment was stay firm, stay firm, stay firm.

Staying firm is not an easy thing in the face of some situations in life. Sometimes we think that we will be able to stay firm and we simply melt on the spot. Perhaps we have all had times like that when we promised ourselves, or others, that we would remain steadfast, only to find in the moment that we shrink away. This morning in our second lesson, the final verse ended with these words: “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.” The apostle Paul is writing to the Christians in Philippi, and he urges them, despite what is going on; namely that some people are falling away and placing their allegiance to other things, that he encourages them to stand firm in their faith in Jesus Christ. This was often difficult, not only for the early church, but it also remains for us yet today. Standing firm in the faith is often difficult to do in our culture. We, as Christians, want to be seen as open and welcoming and those are critically important things. It is also important for us as Lutheran Christians to remain in dialogue with others about the mystery, the tenets, and other difficult subjects in the faith. We are also so called by God to remain firm in our faith, firm in our foundation, but we know life has often demonstrated to us that this is not easy things to do. In our culture today, in today’s politically charged atmosphere, it is often difficult to remain firm in our faith, firm in our biblical and theological foundation. We want to see compromise, we want to see progress, we want to see people united, but sometimes that means we have to, to put it mildly, and perhaps too easily, we agree to disagree, as we stay firm in our core beliefs.

Now the other side of that is, that we are not called like me, as a baseball umpire, to stick on the wrong side of things when we discover that indeed we are incorrect; standing firm for the sake of standing firm, is not the way to be faithful. Paul is telling these earliest believers that as other people begin to change their direction and change what they are keeping as the center of their life; he is exhorting the believers to stand firm in the Gospel message of Christ. To us, this means, what this season of Lent is reminding us and leading us toward; that Jesus came and ushered in the reign of God like never before. It calls us to remember his life, acts and passion, that his message to those who were pushed to the side, those who were marginalized, those who were excluded; to announce to the world the all-encompassing and inclusive powerful reign of God. For this message he was crucified, he was killed, he was murdered; but that was not God's final word.

As we travel to prepare ourselves to celebrate the victory of the empty tomb, we are reminded in this journey that we are called to stand firm with our Savior. In our gospel text today, we have Jesus saying something that seems rather abrupt and even brash, and it seems that way, because it actually is. When threatened by Herod, to the level of others around Jesus coming to him and saying that he might need to change his direction and mission; Jesus fires back very firmly and very directly: He says: "Go and tell that fox..." a strong introduction to his words. Jesus is indicating very boldly that nothing will deter him from completing his mission as the Messiah, the one sent from God.

In this Lenten season we are called to remember what Christ has done, how Christ became a fulfillment and incarnate bearer of God's complete and accepting love of us. When we are tempted to waiver, to give

into hate, to give into exclusion, to give in to viewing others as somehow less than; we are reminded of the gospel message of an unconditional love and an unconditional grace.

Where in your faith journey are you being called to stand firm? Where in your life do you see the Holy Spirit activating a new foundation, a new commitment to living out a life of grace toward oneself and toward others? What is trying to overtake you and bump you off course? And how do you see that coming at you? Are you being called to look at those things that you yourself proclaim and reexamine them? Are you being challenged to hold fast and hang in there, even though it may bring you upheaval and push back?

As Christians we travel this road of faith through the ups and downs, knowing there are times when God's presence seeks to redirect us, while at the same time there are others who seek to rattle us from our foundation and the Gospel. Lent is a time for that reexamination and renewal. It is an important time that affords us the opportunity to take a look at these things and see what God might be up to with you. It is a time to look at our lines in the sand. So, what is challenging your foundation to which you need to remain firm in the faith? What things do you need to give a fresh perspective to? Where are you calling out that maybe needs to be declared safe? What is God up to with you? Amen.