

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 7, 2023

Romans 1:8-17

In just a moment we will hear from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, the first chapter beginning in the eighth verse. If you'd like to, you can find the Pew Bible and you can follow along as we read scripture together. I read this and proclaimed this same scripture last week about this time. We were down in Cardenas, Cuba, in our sister Church there—Juan G. Hall or John G. Hall Presbyterian Church—to an incredibly faithful group of followers of Jesus Christ in that place. So it's interesting to read it again here in this place and to see the way in which the spirit is working and moving. So let us listen with fresh ears to the word of God together this day.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God's saving power for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, as I mentioned to our children just a few moments ago, Paul is writing a letter to this early group of followers of the way, those who are following in the way of Jesus Christ. It's a group that he has never met before, but he knows something about them. Their faith, it turns out, is proclaimed throughout all the world.

Their reputation precedes them. Even though he hasn't been with them in the physical sense, he knows them. He also knows something about the lives and the community in which they are living. Paul knows the significance of what it means to live under the power of the empire.

For these people everyday means are hard to come by. Food is scarce. Their children will ultimately, upon growing up a little bit, be used by the empire in military service. Their lives...their lives will be controlled from birth to death by Imperial authorities in noticeable ways, like we remember just several weeks ago upon Jesus being a part of a trial, and then in many unnoticeable ways.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 7, 2023

Their lives will be impacted by the hope that they are able to hold in their hearts, wondering if they actually have a future under the Imperial rule. And so Paul, in an attempt to encourage the people, begins this letter. After a nice salutation he says that he gives thanks for them.

He prays for them. He's heard about their faith, and as God is his witness, he prays for them continually. Not only that but he wants them to know. "I've tried to come and see you. I tried a lot actually. I've wanted to be close to you, but every time I've tried, something has gotten in the way." The interesting part for us on this side of the text is knowing that soon and very soon Paul will have an opportunity to be with them. He says that he desires to share with them a spiritual gift that will strengthen them, but so, not to sound too confident, he draws back a bit and says, "Not just that; I want to be close to you so that we might mutually encourage one another." Paul knows that disciples encourage disciples, that being in close proximity to those who are living the life of faith encourages that within us as well.

Preaching this letter, this passage, last week in Cardenas, Cuba, I told the congregation there that I felt a bit like Paul.

I had heard of the faith of the members of Juan G. Hall Presbyterian Church. Y'all have been talking about it since I got here two and a half years ago. I've heard about the way in which Allison, the pastor, one of the pastors there, engages his congregation, and the way that Sarah, his wife and another Pastor, how they care for and love their people. I've heard of the faith of the Elders of that church and the way in which they care for their community.

Not only I, but many of us, have wanted to visit them for many years now. It's been more than four since we have seen them. Covid and many other things have gotten in the way of our relationship, a relationship that's spanned more than a decade already. We've wanted to visit them, but we've been thwarted time and again. But we made it this time—six of us! I told them that even though we hadn't been with them, we had been praying for them constantly. Some of them tune in to our Livestream so they know that to be true. I told them that I wasn't so confident that I had a spiritual gift to share with them, but I wanted them to know that their presence and their faith was of mutual encouragement to me and to us and to our church. It was odd to read this text to them and preach it, because I'm not quite sure that anyone knows more about what it means to writhe under the weight of the empire than the people of Juan G. Hall Presbyterian Church, and, more broadly, the people of Cuba.

Food is in short supply in Cardenas and in some other places. Our day was routinely interrupted by scheduled or unscheduled blackouts that would come at seemingly the most inopportune time, just in time for breakfast and then just in time for dinner.

Juan G. Hall has seen a significant number of its members depart Cuba, trying to escape the weight of the Empire there. And talking with some people with young children, they worried that only a few years from now their children, who are completely oblivious to the world around

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 7, 2023

them and the powers and principalities at work, they were worried that they would be brought into military service even against their will.

So it felt odd to proclaim this word to them; and yet Paul's message still resonated very much so, because Paul's message to the people of Rome is Paul's message to people under the weight of empire in all time and place. And that is despite the weight of worldly powers, there is a greater power at work in this world.

The power of the Gospel, it turns out, against all odds, is stronger than any other power and principality, be it of the Empire or some other. In verse 16 Paul says, "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is God's saving power for everyone who believes." And, if you think that that is an empty platitude by a man who's never known the difficulty of the people of Rome, it is not. Paul knows what it is like also to live under the weight of the Empire, even to actually be the weight behind the empire.

And he knows that over time that power which we think to be inexhaustible, that power which we believe to be unbreakable, that power does yield and will yield to the power of the Gospel, which is God's saving power for everyone who has faith.

This week we flew home and spent a good amount of time, maybe even an extra night in an airport hotel that we didn't plan to spend time in. It gave me some time to think.

Paul had never met these people; he had heard about them; he had wondered and worried over them. So Paul's letter for them was actually a letter that was to position them in a posture of hope. Paul goes on throughout the rest of Romans to talk about all sorts of hopes that he has for the Church of Jesus Christ in Rome and amongst the Romans, and it made me start thinking about the power of a letter. Perhaps in the Lenten season you received a handwritten encouragement from our Prayer Ministry, letting you know that they have been praying for you. Perhaps sometime in the past you've received a prayer shawl of some kind. There are few things that are more encouraging than for someone to reach out to you and say that "I've been praying for you. God is my witness that I've been hoping for you, and that I believe that God is working in and through you." So Paul's letter is actually more like a letter to the future Church of Rome. And I wondered to myself this week what it might look like if Paul were to write a letter to you in your future self or even to me or to our church even.

And that's why I went in this little treasure chest that sits underneath the side table beside my bed. There's only a couple of things in that treasure chest. There's a backstage pass to Travis Tritt from 1996. He signed it. Um, there's Monday Night Nitro tickets from 1998—I've talked about wrestling before from this pulpit.

And then there's this book—Did I Tell You. If you aren't familiar with it, and you specifically have a child that's kind of at a threshold moment, I really encourage you to pick it up. It's still in print. It's from 1985, I believe; but you can still find it. It's a message to children who are almost

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 7, 2023

grown, written by Elizabeth Knapp. It's this question that maybe if you are a parent of one of the seniors that came forward, maybe you're asking yourself as they move to a new season of their life, did you tell them everything you needed to tell them.

Did you encourage them in the ways that they needed to be encouraged, inform them in the ways they needed to be informed; or maybe your child is many years from that transition, but it's still a question that you worry over.

The author begins in this way, "Now that you are almost grown, I look back, and I ask myself, 'Did I tell you? Did I tell you all that I meant to tell you, all that I felt was important? Did I tell you, or was it lost in the shuffle of our everyday lives, the busy full days when we taught and didn't know it? And what did we teach you? Was it strong? Was it good? Will it root you in something real that will allow you to grow with a firm and sound foundation? Did I tell you?'" And then refrain after refrain over the next few pages. It's an important book to read, but what struck me again this week is this letter that my mom wrote to me at Christmas of 1993. She says this, "At 12 years of age you have so many exciting years to look forward to. There will be moments that you want to share and moments that are very private to you. I want you to know that I treasure each moment I have with you. Watching you grow has been such a pleasure for me. I plan to be here for you whenever you need me. I love you. Mom."

She penned this letter about six months before she passed away. And so, I go back to it often, reach under the lamp of my side table, open up the treasure chest, and revisit the letter.

And I wonder, I wonder what it might be like to imagine the letter that the spirit is writing to you or even to our church this morning.

What are the great hopes that the spirit of God has for us?

What if this letter that we read this morning from Romans, chapter 1, isn't supposed to just be a letter for a church some 2000 years ago, but it's supposed to be translated once again to us, those whom God has seen fit to call to Idlewild Presbyterian Church in the year of Our Lord 2023? What is it that the spirit might desire for you to hear this day? Perhaps it is a message not so different from what the spirit wishes for Juan G Hall Presbyterian Church to hear— to not lose hope in the midst of the difficulties of the world, to know that hope is still real, still rooted in the very spirit of God, to keep faith, faith that is known throughout the world and this community, to keep faith because faith becomes integral to being able to change the world around us.

I wonder if the spirit of God might want us to know that God is still working in and through us, building up the kingdom of God in Midtown Memphis through Idlewild Presbyterian Church? But here's what I don't know. I don't know the weight that you are carrying today, that which you are shouldering and living under, that which threatens to steal hope and deprive you of faith. I don't know what that weight is. Maybe it's empire; maybe it's by another name. But what I do know is what Paul tells that early church—that no matter the other powers are at work in the

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 7, 2023

world, there is a final and absolute power. It is the power of the Gospel to transform the future of each of us and the world. And what I do know is that, like my mother for me and like Paul for that early church in Rome, God is hoping us into our future. God is hoping you into yours. That we carry with us the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which has the power of salvation for all who have faith.

I wonder what letter the spirit is writing to you this morning. Maybe you're on a threshold moment yourself. Maybe you feel weighed down. And I wonder if you might hear the whisper of the spirit once again to you, to not be ashamed of the Gospel; for in it is the power to save you and indeed the whole world.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.