

Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

Into the Thick of It

Mar 29, 2015

**Ps 118:19-29 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 – Sermon Text = 1 Cor 13:13
(214, 217, 218, 220)**

Abraham did it.
Sarah did it.
Moses did it.
Ruth did it.
Isaiah did it.
Jesus did it.
Paul did it.

In response to God's love for the world and for them,
they went into the thick of it.

It started for all of them
with God inviting them in an irresistible way
to become part of his work in saving the world.
They were called to bless the world with God.
They were nourished to flourish as friends of God.

They weren't alone.
The stories of the Bible are filled with accounts
of human beings, men and women,
who heard the loving invitation
to practice and promote well-being for the whole of creation
and who responded in gratitude for being enabled to participate in that grace.

It was never easy.
Answering that call of God
tested their faith, their hope, and their love.
But the stories that have come down to us
about their gratitude for God's grace
have inspired countless others
in all walks of life
in all countries in the world
to do the same.

These Biblical heroes and heroines
both walked the talk and talked the walk
as they went into the thick of it
with and for the Creator of the world,
the energy that we call God.

For Abraham and Sarah, the thick of it was founding a new people
who would be a blessing to the whole creation.

For Moses, the thick of it was confronting
the principalities and powers of the mighty Egypt
and leading God's people into freedom
through 40 years of wandering and wondering in the wilderness.

For Ruth, the thick of it was a strange land and a strange people
where she practiced loving kindness and spread blessing.

For Isaiah, the thick of it was the principalities and powers
that controlled the people of God in his time
and who were distorting and debasing the will of God.

For Jesus, the thick of it was Jerusalem,
where the principalities and powers of Rome and Judaism
were plotting to get rid of him.

For Paul, the thick of it was the urban centres of his world
where his Gospel of 'Jesus is Lord'
met with scorn, ridicule, prison, and torture.

What gave them the resilience to thrive in the thick of it
was the reality witnessed to in our text from Paul this morning.

All of them had been met and mentored by a God
who had faith in them, hope for them, and love of them.

In grateful response to this God, the only God,
the One who created all that is,
they stepped into the thick complexities of their age
to walk the walk and talk the talk
of God's purpose for the world,
God's desire that faith, hope, and love abide forever
and come to rule the world.

God's grace transformed their reactions
of fear, flight, and fight
into responses of faith, hope, and love.

Deep within them,
it became that simple.

This day, in this age, I invite you to choose life or death, said God.
And they all stepped into the thick of it choosing life.

What are the thickets in your life at this point,
where thorny plants are entangled around you, seemingly impassable?
We all have them –
in our families,
in our workplaces,
in our communities,
around the world, perhaps where friends and families live.

They threatened to rip apart our faith,
destroy our hope,
ravage our love.

The thorns of hatred and rejection cut deep and hurt long.

But the promise of the Gospel,
the promise that Paul offers over and over again
from his thick of it,
is that those mocking thorns do not have the last word.
The last word is from God and it is a word of faith, hope, and love.
I have faith in you, says God.
I have hope for you, says God.
I'm in love with you, says God.
In that strength, step into the thick of it and do what is best.
And as you sort that out, fear not and know that I am with you always.

For a number of years now, I've subscribed to a magazine call *The Christian Century*.
It began publication in 1884, so it has a long and distinguished history.
It's tag line is 'Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully.'
It's current editor and publisher is John M. Buchanan,
retired since 2012 from being minister of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago.
This week his editorial was entitled 'Reason for Hope'
and contained these provocative thoughts about
the week in the Christian year we are about to step into:

*Once again we'll rehearse the drama we know so well.
Peaceful kindness and gracious compassion
will again confront the world of power and violent authority.
We will again remember that Jesus confronted
the political, economic, and social authorities
and that in five short days he was arrested and executed.*

*And yet Easter comes. We believe that although bullies,
thugs, and murderers seem to be winning,
peace and justice will prevail at the end of the day.*

Buchanan is thinking primarily about national and world affairs,
but I think his reflections apply equally to personal and family affairs.

The thorns of the thicket that cut us so deeply
are not the determining or final word in our lives.
That determining and final word belongs to God and God alone.
It is the word of faith, the word of hope, the word of love.
It accompanies us into the thick of it,
carries us through the thick of it,
and brings us out of the thick of it with a new and more resilient life.

This is not always apparent as we face and enter the thick of it.
We are easily overwhelmed by fear, doubt, and distrust.
But listen and look for the signs of God's presence,
subtle little things in the depths of your soul that encourage you on.
They are there and God will reveal them to you.

The crowds on that first Palm Sunday didn't really get it.
They welcomed Jesus as the promised avenger of God,
the one who would defeat the Romans and end corruption among the Jews.
They missed the subtle signal
that Jesus was riding into the thick of it on a donkey.
That signal came from the writings of the prophet Zechariah.
There, the Messiah, God's anointed One, comes humbly on a donkey,
coming into the thick of it with "peaceful kindness and gracious compassion."

So, as you step out of this time of worship and nourishing
into the thick of whatever is entangling you in your life,
know that you do so empowered and protected
by God's faith in you, God's hope for you, and God's love of you.
You are not alone.
God, together with his people, the church, go with you and stay with you
through the thick of it.

And, in the end, there is the flourishing life that only God can give.

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can
ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen (Eph 3:20-21)*