

# Strength for the Journey

5/25/14

Among the high points of history are the times when a famous leader gives his or her farewell address to their followers or to their country. There are many of these in the Bible. In Genesis Jacob says goodbye and leaves his instructions to his sons. Joshua summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials to say farewell and to impart a blessing. Samuel, David, and many others in the Bible gave goodbye speeches. They generally fit the pattern of announcing their impending death, the comfort it brings to them to be making the announcement, and what their followers can expect in the future.

Secular leaders have long done the same thing. Often these speeches are powerful, touching tributes to the privilege of having been able to lead. Our favorite son in Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, said goodbye to his people with remarks in Springfield on the start of his journey to Washington, D.C. to assume the presidency. There, in front of family and friends of long standing at the Great Western Railroad station, Lincoln spoke with emotion and affection for those who he noted had seen him pass from a young to an old man. He was headed off to war and death, and asked for their prayers and God's guidance as he faced his future.

Lou Gehrig famously said goodbye to baseball fans everywhere when he summoned the courage and grace to face a terrible disease and to retire from the game beloved and away from the fans who loved him. Somehow he managed to say that he had received a "tough break", but still had a lot to live for since he was, in his words, "the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

And on a day when we remember fallen soldiers, we recall General Douglas MacArthur's goodbye farewell to the Corps of Cadets at West Point in 1962. In it he repeated the words belonging to the Corps – duty – honor – country, and said that motto would always remain with him, and that he would in his remaining time remember the "Corps, and the Corps, and the Corps".

John, chapter 14, is part of what scholars call the "Farewell Discourse" of Jesus. The syntax of these words fits the pattern of speeches that say goodbye. There are however, a couple of profound differences. Jesus told his surprised and confused disciples that he would be leaving them, but that he would still be present by his Spirit and that he would return at the end of the age. As we hear part of this discourse, know that in preparing his disciples for his departure and for the arrival of the Holy Spirit, he speaks also to us now. READ JOHN 14:15-21

I know you can say that any of the words of Jesus are remarkable, but these words are indeed incredible. Imagine the disciples' confusion and sadness. Then picture what they might have made of his statement that he will not leave them as orphans. He further said the Spirit of Truth would be with them forever. All of that sounded wonderful, but they had to be thinking they would still rather have Jesus himself. Somehow, in a mysterious and magnificent way he reassured them with an amazing reality – that he was inextricably united with his friends forever – that he was in them and they were in him and that all of them were in the Father. And even more – that they were loved by the Father and by Jesus forever and ever.

Pastor Mark Ralls has commented on these verses with a helpful insight. Jesus wasn't just saying he loved the disciples, he was saying that he cherished them. It's an even better kind of emotion to cherish someone more than just love them. To cherish is to install a profound commitment to the relationship; to engage in a stubborn and steadfast loyalty. I remember Laurie and I saying to each other 35 years ago that we would love honor and cherish each other. At 23 and 22 we likely didn't fully realize the import of the word cherish. Happily, we do now.

On this day that we are about the work of remembering – let's remember a vital biblical truth. Do you realize how deeply you are loved by God? Do you realize that Jesus himself cherishes you? It's not because you're so likeable – and I think you are! But it has nothing to do with your likeability, or even whether or not you're a lovable person. You are loved – make that cherished – by Christ.

So far, so good - I'm sure we would all agree that Jesus has made a beautiful farewell statement, and on our good days we would acknowledge that we are deeply, deeply loved by God. But here are the real questions: What do we do on the bad days? What or who do we lean on when troubles come? Does this text of the Bible give us hope for when we've hit an emotional bottom? Can Jesus really be present for us when he is not here in the flesh? Does the Holy Spirit really come alongside us when we hurt, or is that just religious jargon?

The Psalmist gives us at least a partial answer to this question.  
Hear these selected verses from Psalm 66: (Read Psalm 68)

The psalmist is telling us that when troubles come, God is present with his people. Jesus obviously gives us an even greater assurance. He says he will ask the Father for even greater help – that God will give us another Counselor to be with us forever – the Holy Spirit. When I hear the word “counselor”, I think of someone you or I would go to in order to pour out our problems or hear our hurts or to give us sound counsel. They can be really helpful – even essential. Another translation uses the word “comforter”. That's helpful too, but in my worst moments I don't just need comforting, I need a solution. That can be found in a third word. Many scholars think is that this word “counselor” or “comforter is better translated “strengthener”. A counselor or a comforter might help us make the best of a bad situation. But a strengthener, one who convinces us of the reality of God's presence in our lives, thus giving us strength, might well accomplish a change of heart in us. It doesn't directly change the situation, or make the problem go away, but when the Strengthener bolsters us, clarifies matters for us - it causes us to be able to face the future believing in God's providential care.

This reality is a gift. It is a joyful, unmerited gift that we receive as the children of God to have dwelling in us the very Spirit of God. This is the promise to believers – we are never alone and we can always be resourced with the strength we need to face the decidedly difficult challenges life brings us. About four years ago, I had the privilege to spend a couple of days with one of the most God-possessed and strongest people I have ever known. I'll tell you about who that was and how it happened, but first the backstory.

A few years ago, a woman named Lauren Hillenbrand wrote her first best-selling book, a

wonderful telling of the story of a horse named Seabiscuit, a lowly regarded racehorse who became a thoroughbred champion in the midst of the Great Depression. Seabiscuit electrified a nation down on its luck and happy to find a hero, even if it was a horse.

Then, a few years later, Hillenbrand found another rising from the ashes hero in the person of Louie Zamperini, a man who had passed his ninetieth birthday and though still vital, had disappeared from the public eye. Earlier in his life, he had been a major public figure. Hillenbrand wrote a book about Louie, titled Unbroken, and re-told his story to the nation. After I had read this second book, I was so captivated by the man's story that I arranged for three of us from the church we were serving in California to go to Los Angeles and interview Louie on camera to further capture his story, and frankly, just to spend time with him. First, if you don't know about his life, I'll tell you a bit about the man. In his young days, Louie was an undisciplined, lazy student and part-time troublemaker. He was also gifted with legs that propelled him faster than most humans could even think about going. He likes to joke that he never got in trouble with the law because the law simply couldn't catch him.

Louie became a track star at the University of Southern California and during his freshman year made the U.S. Olympic track team that went to the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. As the youngest runner on the team, he wasn't expected to medal, and he didn't, but his closing sprint in the 1500 meters was so impressive that he was called to the box seats of none other than Adolph Hitler for a hand shake, a moment captured on film. He became an international athletic sensation and was favored to win the gold in the next Olympic Games and was projected as the first man who would break the four minute mile. There would of course be no games in 1940 as war had broken out. Zamperini became a pilot for our country in the Pacific, where he was shot down. He spent over a month in a life raft in the Pacific without fresh water or food, literally frying under the sweltering sun. He then was discovered and taken prisoner for two years in a barbaric prisoner of war camp.

More is known today about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but when Louie came home to a hero's welcome, no one knew how much he was struggling or how much emotional pain he was in. After all the acclaim died down, and he had now been nationally famous twice, he turned to alcohol to numb his fevered mind. Soon his life, his marriage, his future, was all dashed on the rocks of persistent pain and an alcoholic haze. Finally, his wife gave him a choice – he could go hear a young evangelist named Billy Graham who had come to Los Angeles for a revival, or he could face life without her. Well, you can imagine what happened. Louie grudgingly went to the Crusade, and was convicted of his need for something radically different in his life. He went again the next night, received the forgiveness and hope of Jesus, and in his infant Christian state was able to walk away from all the bad dreams, from dependence on alcohol, into a healthier marriage, and back into life itself. It's the story of a wonderful miracle.

So fast forward with me to the visit I had with Louie in his cluttered living room in the modest home in the Hollywood Hills he had lived in since returning from the war. By the way, he lived just above Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, but I was unsuccessful in interviewing them.

The three of us who had gone to talk with Louie all had our own questions for him. What I wanted to know was what the secret to his emotional and spiritual strength was. I knew he was something of a physical marvel. I also knew he would credit Christ for all the changes that had occurred in his life. What I needed to know was how that became operational for him.

Louie then proceeded to rattle off scripture verse after scripture verse that pointed to the presence of Christ in the life of the believing person. He stated unequivocally that he regularly memorized scripture and shared his faith with people he met. To this day, there are people in Hollywood several of whose names you would know, who because of Louie's, witness, believe, and who now daily befriend a man in his mid-90's who still finds the strength of Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

All of this is told as a reminder that all of us need strength for the journey. I meet a lot of tired people. Lately, I've been a little weary myself. As Scott Peck once put it with elegant simplicity in his book The Road Less Travelled, life is difficult. Understanding and accepting that is the first step toward full mental health. For the Christian, there is an available resource for dealing with the struggles of life – the presence of Christ in our lives who by the work of the Holy Spirit provides the strength to face whatever comes our way, the strength to move ahead, the will to live under the banner of faith. If this day, your zeal is flagging, you're not alone. If this day your memories are sorrowful; Christ offers you his peace. If tomorrow seems grim, ask not for the problem to go away, ask for the strength to meet the challenge to overcome it. In Jesus' farewell address, he left us an entirely sufficient source of strength. May you know its power.