

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 26, 2013, dedicated to all who demonstrate courage and grace in life's storms, including Sharon Walquist and Karen Mozingo; all veterans and their families – past, present and future; the Rev. Tish Malloy, Moore, Okla., First United Methodist Church and the community of Moore, including Ben, Ashley, Phoenix, Aiden, Tucker and Brynley.

Living Between Haystacks and Hope

Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

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Let us pray, May the words of my mouth and the mediation of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen.

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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 . . . " (Romans 1:8 – 11)

For all of us know that -

". . . we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our

Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:1-5)

It is very clear that the choices you have made were rich and deep, even in that crazy red mud. There were opportunities to dig in – it is a good place to know what it means to dwell in a special place, and that all places - whether physical, emotional or spiritual, all come with a long string of choices.

It was a good decision to find your church and to make acquaintance and friendships with neighbors, and to incorporate them into your life. I know your roots were strengthened with every BBQ you shared in your backyards; and laughter was well established when you invited the neighbors to your above ground pools. And it is certain your shared laughter will help you to remember the joy in placing the sprinkler on the ground -- right in the center underneath the backyard trampoline so that everyone had the chance to cool off when they jumped high in air in the 110 degrees days of summer. These will spark smiles for years to come.

My own heart is lightened remembering how the children played on the sidewalks when the winter came. It is wonderful that you took lots of pictures of your parents grandchildren when the once or twice a year snow falls finally arrived– (grandparents invest a lot of joy in such things as this). Just as it was when the ice coated the sidewalks, and you sent emails and utube clips of them scooting down the sidewalks in their tennis shoes, gliding across the thin sheet of ice under foot. It is so good to remember!

And if, in the end, you look back and have wishes for things you could have done but left undone, I hope you will hug yourself and each other and then tell your stories of your life. Every time you do this, you give new opportunities for the Spirit to participate. Share your tears freely as well - the spirit can always use a good drenching!

I remind you only of things you already know, that as you remember and tell your tales, your heart will be both broken and healed a little more. In the end, you will be entering the stream of stories of all God's children. This is very good news.

This is just the method that taught us about those crazy journeys of Abraham and Sarah, David and Goliath, Miriam, Mary and Martha, and that woman without even a name to claim, at the well. God's children have forever been telling their tales. (It's only you and I that think everything has to be posted on Facebook or Twitter before it is real!) One day those opportunities to save and savor life in print and picture will return. I promise you, the shock, piercing pain and fear really will pass. In the meantime, I know you will be strengthened as you keep on remembering – valuing and telling others about your daily life. It is good and right and healing.

Most of all, remember God is with you; you can make it through anything. The Israelites never expected to cross over through the Red Sea, nor suffer floods, famines and deserts of sand and soul either. And yet we have come to know them... and in some peculiar way, I believe they know us too.

They know the present wilderness and the relentless ache in your belly. They know the struggling hearts and souls that are all around you. The ache that seems insurmountable comes in so many forms – in soul, and body and mind; it always has. We are part of the past and part of the future.

Give shade to your eyes as you quickly glance backward. You will see and hear the children from days long ago playing games on the dusty roads -- the would-be-soldiers playing marbles in the dirt circles in the sand, who never expected to live and die in brutal wars we tagged later as “American Revolution,” “American Civil War,” “World War One,” “World War Two,” “Korean,” “Vietnam,”

“Gulf,” “Iraq,” “Afghanistan,” and wars to come that we memorialize now and will no doubt add to the list of the future.

You can also see that forever and ever there have been wilderness trials of those who engaged in battles of disease and suffering. Ordeals preceded us and will follow us. None of the deserts of sand and soul – or floods and famines - were imagined or anticipated anymore than the terror and tumult of flying debris assaulting Oklahomans. But somehow, through God’s miraculous love, the grace of God and neighbor, as well as the stories of terror and tenacity, things come back together. Somehow between the haystacks of rubble that now exist where children used to play, the hope of God continues to rise taller and spread farther.

You, the children of God, are mighty. Every breath you take fills you with new spirit and enlivens your life. Your daily trials and courage touch the lives of others you may or may not ever meet, with hope and courage. You teach us even now the multitude of ways in which "suffering produces endurance; and endurance produces character, and character produces hope"– over and over again.

We are inspired by your spirit and God’s Spirit. We are renewed as we watch and learn more each day about your teachers, police, firefighters, doctors, nurses, parents, grandparents, neighbors and town. We are inspired by your church and the ways you are coming together in ecumenical faith with one another, through One God. We are renewed in faith by the neighbors and strangers who long to help you discover creative ways to simply put one foot in front of the other.

We are amazed at the limitless ways you demonstrate the glory of God, even here, even now.

* We want you to know that as the deep challenges rise up and subside, as they have for centuries, our prayers are with you.

* We want you to know, when the way is made clear for assistance, we will participate as you let us know your needs.

* We want you to know that the nightmares will pass over, and God will stay with you.

* We want you to know we believe with you that - "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:7). Amen.

Together in faith, to God be all glory.

Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson

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