

Arise: Whatever the Hardship, Keep Rising Up

2 Corinthians 6:1-10

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Hurdles. Athletes face the challenge of hurdles. Low hurdles and high hurdles in track and field competitions all over the country. Some athletes go over them and some go through them. And because every athlete knows you can't go around them, they also know it's always a challenge to go over them. I probably don't need to remind you that we've faced many challenges, many hurdles over the past couple of years. We've cleared a lot of collective hurdles together as community here and extended.

Think about it, we've faced hurdles brought on by a global pandemic. And early on we had to figure stuff out. We had to figure out where to buy paper towels, toilet paper, and yeast. And then as time went on, there were the hurdles of losing businesses, large and small, shifting world economies made ongoing challenges to international supply chains, skyrocketing gas prices have been hurdles that we've all dealt with. People have struggled with wearing masks and how to manage their kids' and grandkids' educations. More recently, people have had to drive several extra miles to find cream cheese and flour. And we've had to get used to paying more – way more for coffee. And now, of course, all of that pales compared to the far more severe, even jarring hardships of the war in Ukraine.

There have been personal hurdles as well in our lives. Hurdles and hardships brought about by cancer and autoimmune diseases, dying parents and sick kiddos, inperson school, online school, hybrid education, Zoom and Teams meetings have challenged all kinds of people. And that's just the shortlist; hurdles are everywhere. Life is not a piece of cake. And that, my friends, has always been the case.

We're in the post-Easter season with our series called "Arise." We're exploring how the power of Jesus' resurrection is at work in every area of our life together. We want to harness the power of new life resurrection in our fellowship, partnerships,

discipleship, worship, and stewardship. Today I want to focus on dealing with challenges and hurdles so that whatever the hardship that we experience in our lives, we can keep rising up. In his remarkable book, *We Make The Road By Walking*, Brian McLaren reimagines the experiences of the early followers of Jesus and the early church through the filter of the resurrection, which changed everything. Every hurdle, every challenge, every hardship looked at through the resurrection lens brought new possibilities for life and aliveness.

In 2 Corinthians 6:1-10, we find an account of the challenges and hurdles faced by the Apostle Paul. He was no stranger to hardship. Life was not a piece of cake for him. Life was not easy. Here's how the Apostle Paul described his life in the paraphrase by Brian McLaren:

"Over thirty years have passed since Jesus launched this uprising of faith, hope, and love in our world. Over a dozen years have passed since we traveled with Paul around the Mediterranean. Since then, the uprising has continued to spread. New leaders have arisen. People around the empire have joined us. We know the movement is gaining strength. It is gaining strength largely because of the hardships we have faced. There have been persecutions from outsiders, betrayals by insiders, and stupid arguments that wasted time and drained our energy. There have been divisions, moral scandals, financial improprieties, all kinds of crazy teachings that confuse and distract, power struggles, sad things that, in many ways, show how easy it is to forget what this whole movement is supposed to be about. As we've offended and forgiven each other, as we've experienced rifts and reconciliations, we've learned that God doesn't give us shortcuts around hardships but strengthens us through them."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

A lot is going on here. First, did you notice that last line? "God doesn't give us shortcuts around hardships but uses those challenges to strengthen us through them." Wow. Let's make sure we understand. As long as we're singing "What a Friend We Have In Jesus" and "Just a Closer Walk With God" it doesn't mean that we get a pass on hardship. We don't get to go around the difficulty we face in life. We go through the difficulty. When we read in Deuteronomy 31:6, where

God says, “I will never leave you or forsake you...” that doesn’t mean that God has abandoned us when we feel alone or forsaken. It does mean that when we’re experiencing hardship, God is deeply present with us, moving us through that hardship. The starting point is this: God is not the oppressor. God is not the source of hardship. God is not placing hurdles in front of us to make us stronger, teach us a lesson. God does not give you cancer. God does not inflict pain, create heartache, or orchestrate calamity to strengthen faith, and make us more willing disciples. There’s nothing in scripture that supports that. Instead, what God does out of extravagant love and compassion is provide the way into and through all of that so that whatever the hardship, we can keep rising up!

That is at the heart of a passage from Isaiah 40:28-31. Isaiah speaks these words from God to people who needed to be reminded that whatever the hardship, God was the one providing what they needed to keep rising up. God speaks through Isaiah when Isaiah writes, *“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. Instead, he gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”*

When it comes to dealing with hardship in our lives, there are no easy answers. People who give you easy answers want you to take the shortcut around them. God says, “I’ll be with you through them.” To minimize the difficulty, avoiding the reality of hardship in our lives is to take the shortcut around them. God says, “I’ll be with you through them.” To gloss over challenges by slapping on a bible verse here or offering a spiritual-sounding platitude there is to take the shortcut around them. God says, “I’ll be with you through them.” In my own experience with hurdles, and challenges, and hardships, I’ve come to hold on to three things that have kept me really grounded. These aren’t platitudes; these aren’t simple responses to complicated things. These are some things that have actually helped me. My hope today is that they’ll be helpful to you.

We want to harness the power of learning, harness the power of the pause, and harness the power of connections.

Harness the Power of Learning

The experience of hardship in our lives always has something to teach us if we’re willing to learn. The now-familiar story of my encounter with a drunk driver just a few years ago that could easily have turned out far worse than it did, taught me that. It wasn’t so much the actual experience of the accident that impacted me. It was what I learned through the experience of having a therapist walk me back through what seemed like a pretty dark tunnel back out into the light of day. It took some time for me to get to that point. But I’ve learned some helpful life lessons through all of that.

Think back through your life and consider the best life lessons you learned. Those life lessons are probably the result of a challenge you faced, a hurdle you had to clear, some hardship you had to endure. You probably learned a lot because of the hardship. Think of it this way: you know when you go camping, and everything is perfect? No bugs, no rain, no flat tires, no getting lost, no noisy campgrounds, no bad food, no arguments with your spouse or kids. It’s great not to have any of those things. But what you also don’t have is a story to tell. There’s no “aha!” moment, no wisdom to pull out and pass along to others. There’s nothing to rise above. The best life lessons are usually what we learn when we get chased into our tent by the mosquitos. And then, in the middle of the night, as the rain and hail blow through, we make the mad dash from our water-soaked sleeping bags to the car, the same vehicle on which we had to change the flat tire ten miles from the noisy campground. And suddenly, we’re learning about what’s called “Plan B” because that’s where most of life is lived! That’s where the stories are! That’s where the wisdom is. That’s where the life lessons are. That’s harnessing the power of learning.

Harness the Power of Pause

Just a few weeks ago, during what we annually and appropriately refer to as March Madness, several professional athletes teamed up with the sports drink brand Powerade. They wanted to focus not on gymnastics, soccer, football, hockey, or swimming, but instead, they wanted to focus on taking a break from all of that. U.S. gymnast Simone Biles withdrew from the competition during last year’s Olympics to take a break, to pause. The top-tier Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka withdrew from Wimbledon to take “personal time” last summer. Other athletes like Premier League soccer manager Antonio Conte,

Olympic gold diver Tom Daley, and NBA star Chris Weber all got behind the effort to encourage people to pause. The pressure to perform and win became a nearly impossible hardship to rise above, so they announced that they were taking a break.

VIDEO

It's important to pause when things get really challenging. When it feels like you're in a boat without a rudder, and the current is taking you places you'd never dream of going, it's time to pause and get some rest, some exercise, eat some good food, take a nap, go for a walk, or sit in your favorite chair. There is great wisdom in pausing, slowing down, creating some margin in our days and some gap in our otherwise overscheduled lives to listen to the Holy Spirit whisper into our souls. Pausing for a few moments each day to read scripture, spending some time meditating, sitting in silence, praying, doing less than you usually do is one of the best things you can do for your mental, physical, and spiritual health. When we do that, we find ourselves coming back to life. And when we come back to the life God has given us, we come back to our best, most genuine, most authentic selves. That's harnessing the power of the pause.

Harness the Power of Connections

When we slow down enough to catch our breath and catch ourselves, we realize that others around us are experiencing the same thing. That's when we experience the gift of harnessing the Power of Connections. This is about knowing, really knowing, that we are not alone. God doesn't give us shortcuts around hardships but strengthens us through them, and that usually happens in the context of community.

A few weeks ago, when Jeff was preaching about peace, he told a story about receiving a call from a friend whose mother was near death. This woman had been an ELCA pastor and had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer six months prior. Because of Jeff's connection to the family and pancreatic cancer, he had been asked to be this woman's pastor as she came to the end of her life. Jeff told us that when he walked into her room that evening, he said it was clear that she would not live through the night and that she was at peace with that. What struck me about that story was how she was surrounded by family, loved ones who held her hand, wiped her brow, prayed with her, told her that she was loved, and sang her favorite hymns together. This woman was so at peace – even in the face of death – because of the physical presence

of Jesus Christ through the lives of her loved ones and her family. That is the power of connection.

Friends, as you go into the week ahead, I want to challenge you to make this practical. Here are some ideas. First, as you face the hurdles, challenges, and hardships this week, ask yourself, "What am I learning about God, about myself, about others through this challenging time?" Or try this: find some time to pause this week. Build some margin into your schedule, and take some extra time to listen to the Spirit speak to you through scripture, prayer, or just sit in silence for a few minutes each day. Finally, find a small group of friends and talk through these things together. If you do that, whatever the hurdles, challenges, and hardships, you will rise up. That's the Easter promise.