

**Scripture – John 16:19 - 33: In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world.”**

Good morning Pathway and happy new month. For the last three months, my body has been fighting one thing or another so it is great to be here this morning and I truly celebrate God's goodness and healing.

Today we are starting new sermon series called The Encouragement Project. The dictionary defines encouragement as 'the act of giving someone **support, confidence** or **hope**. Encouragement has always been a vital part of the church and our focus this month will be drawing on Scripture and thinking of practical ways to express support, build each other up in our identity in Christ and outwardly live out the hope that is ours in Christ. Encouragement is so important because it reminds people that they belong somewhere. If there was no encouragement within the body of Christ, a lot of people would feel unseen, unloved and unimportant. Sharing encouragement is also a way of affirming God's work in other people's life, affirming their spiritual growth and spiritual gifts. A timely text message or phone call can make a big difference to how a person sees themselves in relation to God or the larger body of Christ. And it can turn their hearts to God in a new way. In fact, **Hebrews 3:13** calls on us to encourage one another DAILY, so that no one will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. The author knew that our walk with God is not a solitary affair and that if we get disconnected from one another, it is easy for us to fall prey to sin. Note that he did not merely say that we would become hardened by sin alone but by its deceitfulness. The devil doesn't just want to trap you into sin, he also uses that sin to lie to us and deceive us into thinking that our sin should separate us from God and others. So we need to hear from others that they are praying for us, that they miss seeing us at church or at small group to remind us that we still belong. We need to be reminded that we are forgiven and are not alone in our struggle against the schemes of the devil.

But it is not just sin that hardens our hearts, is it? Fear and uncertainty like what we've been experiencing can turn our focus from God. Pain, illness, despair and fatigue can make it difficult to see God's hand at work in our lives and the world around us. Our hearts can become hardened towards the things of God because we feel alone in our struggle. For the last 8 months we've been praying about something and as the months went by, I began to give up hope that God would answer that prayer. I got so discouraged that at some point I decided that God's silence on the matter must be a no and I stopped praying about it. Then just this past week a friend called me from Nairobi to share something that one of

her friends that I did not know very well had shared with her. God had given this other lady a word of knowledge about the very thing that I had been praying about and because we're not very close she thought she'd first share with my friend and get some feedback on how to go about sharing it. When my friend called she said I just wanted to encourage you, in this case, give you confidence, that God has heard your prayer and he has answered it even though you couldn't see it.

One good outcome of the past year is that many people have developed a deeper appreciation for relationships and we've come to realize just how much we need community and encouragement. I am excited for us to focus on building each other up this month and we will be sharing things we can do each week to encourage someone in our community.

But before we move outward, it is important for us to be grounded in our Ultimate source of support, confidence and hope, which is the Word of God. Our scripture for today comes from John 16: 19 – 33:

<sup>19</sup> Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'?" <sup>20</sup> Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. <sup>21</sup> A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. <sup>22</sup> So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. <sup>23</sup> In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. <sup>24</sup> Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

<sup>25</sup> "Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. <sup>26</sup> In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. <sup>27</sup> No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. <sup>28</sup> I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father."

<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus' disciples said, "Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. <sup>30</sup> Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God."

<sup>31</sup> "Do you now believe?" Jesus replied. <sup>32</sup> "A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

<sup>33</sup> "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Quick background on this passage: This is one of the farewell speeches that Jesus gave to his disciples before he was arrested. This particular one was the very last speech, his parting shot before he started the journey to the cross. It was a difficult speech for the disciples to hear and a difficult passage for us too. On the surface of it, it doesn't sound very encouraging. Imagine if the head of your family was going to die and they called the family together to share some final wisdom and instill some confidence about the future. They tell you that they've left a deposit that will guarantee access to their wealth and legacy for the rest of your life. But they also tell you that once they're gone, you are going to suffer; you will have trouble and sorrow in the world without them. They tell you that you will probably be kicked out of your home, maybe even chased out of your city. But don't worry, at some point, your sorrow will turn into joy. You will always have access to their wealth and help but this one thing you can count on: there's trouble ahead of you after they're gone.

That would not be the most encouraging goodbye speech, would it? It is no wonder that the disciples were confused. They had expected a Messiah who would finally establish God's rule on earth by setting up a kingdom and giving them a part in that kingdom. They had suffered before under Roman rule but finally, victory was coming! The world was going to get what it deserved and Jesus and his followers would enjoy lives of peace and prosperity. But Jesus kept talking about going away and leaving them. Sure, he had promised to send a helper who would advocate for them. And he had promised that they would have whatever they asked God for in Jesus' name. But still, what's up with all the promises of trouble and suffering? Couldn't he have found a way to take care of that too while he was on the cross?

Jesus knew that he was leaving his disciples in a broken world. His death and resurrection would introduce for them the paradox of 'already but not yet.' Sin and death were going to be defeated on the cross and his followers would have access to that victory in the present if they believed. But they and the world around them would not yet experience the fullness of that victory until Jesus came back again. What the cross accomplished for us and in us would be at loggerheads with what the world is like. And so yes, through the cross of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit, we would

experience freedom from sin, shame and fear. We now have direct access to God the Father through the Holy Spirit and by the power of Jesus' name. But the world around us continues to be broken and we continue to experience the effects of that brokenness. Jesus didn't want us to be ignorant. He wanted us to know what to expect but more than that, how to handle it. **In vs. 33 he says, I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace.** In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

So, what encouragement can we draw for ourselves from this passage? There are several encouragements but I will touch only on three.

### **1. We are not alone.**

In the first part of this speech, Jesus talked about the coming of the Holy Spirit and the role he would play in the believers' lives. In vs. 7, Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as an Advocate. Advocates publicly support or recommend a cause or policy. The Holy Spirit wasn't going to just support Jesus' followers in their private endeavors of prayer and personal devotion. He would also publicly support their ministry and the cause of the gospel. Jesus was leaving, but he wasn't leaving us alone. If you've been involved in policy matters or activism, you know how uplifting it can be to have someone in power endorse your work. Their authority and influence can draw greater attention and open doors for you that you might not otherwise have been able to walk through. We see that clearly with the disciples and the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Being God himself, the Holy Spirit's influence was not just physical but spiritual, a realm we would not have access to without him. We see this influence in the public displays of the Spirit's power in the book of Acts. The disciples were able to heal people, argue confidently with religious leaders and perform other miracles that added credibility to their message about Jesus.

Besides advocating for us and the cause of Jesus, the Holy Spirit would also be our teacher. Vs. 13 says, *"But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come."* Not only are not alone in trying to live out our faith before the world, we are also not alone in figuring out what the truth is. Jesus did not leave us to beat our way around without a guide. Jesus was leaving the disciples physically and would not be able to reveal to them God's will as he had done before. But that didn't mean that they would be left to figure it out themselves, and neither are we. There are many times when I'll be troubled in my spirit

about something that I can't quite put a finger on. Before I'd pray for the feeling to go away but then I learned that sometimes it was a way that God was trying to catch my attention. And so I began praying that the Holy Spirit would reveal to me the truth behind my unease. Sometimes it turns out that I have grieved him by something I had said or done and I needed to confess. Sometimes it has nothing to do with me and God will bring someone else to mind. Sometimes he will reveal what is going on with that person that I need to pray about but many times all I know is that I need to pray for them. There will be times I won't even know exactly what to pray for and I'll just call out to God on their behalf in weeping. Sometimes it will take a few minutes to get a sense of relief, sometimes it might go on all day. Usually when I sense a leading to pray for someone I'll reach out to them afterwards and find out how they are, let them know that I was praying for them. And when I do there are times when I'll find out why God laid them on my heart and other times I won't know until something happens much later.

Whatever the case, I am always so encouraged that God doesn't expect us to follow him by our own strength or wisdom. He doesn't leave us to guess whether we're on the right path or not. No matter what is going on in our lives, or where we are on our spiritual journey, we have this encouragement from Scripture that we are not alone. We are never alone. We have an advocate, a teacher, and an intercessor who is always at work in us and on our behalf.

## **2. We have the promise of answered prayer**

The second encouragement we draw from this passage is the direct access to the Father that Christ gave us through his death. In vs. 23 – 24, Jesus gave the disciples this amazing promise: "In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."

Long before this incident, Jesus had taught the disciples how to pray as we see in Matthew 6:9ff. They had watched him pray on numerous occasions when he healed people and performed other miracles. Throughout his ministry, Jesus had modeled prayer to his disciples. They had the comfort of his presence and guidance, listening closely and watching the prayers answered in real time. But now Jesus was leaving them and they would have to practice what he had taught them on their own. Jesus knew that they were worried about what his departure would mean for their continuing relationship with God. Would God hear them the same way now that Jesus wasn't there to mediate? Understanding this fear and anxiety, Jesus acknowledges that yes, their relationship with God will change. But this is good news! They will no longer have to "hide" behind Jesus when approaching the Father; they could now approach the Father themselves and he would give them whatever they asked for in Jesus' name.

Earlier in the passage he had mentioned that they would experience sorrow, like a woman in labor, but their sorrow would soon turn to joy once they saw the fulfillment of what Jesus had promised. Here, Jesus says that their joy would be complete when they asked and received. This answering of prayer would be like an aha moment for them. They would experience some measure of joy when Jesus rose again from the dead, experience sorrow when he departed and then their earlier joy would come full circle when they fully grasped what Christ's work on the cross had accomplished on their behalf.

We too have that same encouragement that the disciples had. Because of the cross, there is no longer a barrier between us and God; we can approach him directly with our needs and desires. And God doesn't just delight in hearing us pray, he also delights in giving us what we ask for as long as we pray in the name of Jesus. Praying in Jesus' name means to ask God as though Jesus himself was asking, which means asking for things that aligned to who Jesus is and what his objective in the world and in our lives.

But you and I know that God doesn't always seem to give us whatever we ask for, right? Even when we are convinced that we have prayed in Jesus' name. It can be very discouraging when certain prayers don't get answered. Praying about this pandemic has been discouraging for me at times. I know that God has the power to change things, he has the power to disarm the virus and rob it of its power to harm and kill us. And it's easy to wonder: does it not glorify God for people to be well? Is it not in line with his will? If you've prayed for a loved one who didn't get better as I have then you understand the sense of confusion and discouragement, even anger, that can result in such answered prayers.

Have you ever been distressed about something that you just wanted someone to hear you out? This is something we've talked about in our marriage discussions as a difference between the way we process big things. There are times when I'll share a problem with David looking for a solution to whatever is bothering me. But there are many other times when all I need is to be heard, especially when the problem is not something that can be easily solved like when I feel lonely or angry about something. The best "solution" for me in that situation is for him to simply sit, hold me and listen as I process various emotions and scenarios. And I've come to realize that prayer can be like that: sometimes the privilege of simply having access to God is an answer in itself. Sometimes the answer is not a change in my circumstances but an unburdening of my soul and heart. The answer is not that whatever I was worried or afraid about has changed but that I'm no longer carrying the fear and worry because I have handed it over to God in prayer.

And then there are those times when our will and our desires are exactly aligned to God's and our prayers get exactly the answers we wanted, times when the Holy Spirit, our Advocate, shows up to support and endorse our prayer causes publicly and we receive tangible answers to prayer: our financial needs get met, we or our loved one get healed, people we love come to the faith.

But our greatest encouragement in all this is simply that we can pray. No matter who we are or where we've been, no matter what we're going through, we can approach God's throne of grace with the confidence that we will be heard and we will be answered.

### **3. We are covered by Christ's victory**

Jesus' very last words to the disciples were, "In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world." It is interesting that he did not promise them that THEY would overcome the troubles they would face. He wasn't even saying that because he has overcome, so will they; although it's easy to draw that conclusion. That is certainly how I always read that promise: I thought that Jesus meant that I have overcome the world because Jesus has done it himself. And then I would get discouraged because when I hold up my "performance" as a world overcomer next to Jesus, I would feel like I was constantly letting him down. So I have been relieved to see those words in new light. I remember my first time playing tennis and every time I made a mistake, one of the guys we were playing with kept shouting, "you're doing great BG!" And instead of feeling encouraged, that actually upset me because it was clear to everyone one that I wasn't doing great. I didn't feel inspired to do better because the others were so good at the game. I felt like giving up because I didn't measure up.

Thankfully, our encouragement does not lie in our own ability to overcome challenges based on Christ's victory. Our encouragement comes from knowing that Christ's victory covers us and we don't have to do any overcoming of our own because that has already been accomplished. Jesus wasn't kidding about us facing trouble in the world. But he wanted us to have peace in the midst of these troubles because he had robbed them of the power to destroy us. As 2 Cor 4:8 – 9 says, we might be pressed but not crushed, we might experience persecution but won't be abandoned. And though we get struck down from time to time, we are not destroyed.

Today we've seen:

- 1. We are not alone.**
- 2. We have the promise of answered prayer**
- 3. We are covered by Christ's victory**

Reflection Question:

What encouragement can you draw from today's message?