

HELD: WITH THE EVERLASTING ARMS OF GOD

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch
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TEXT: Deuteronomy 33:25-27

A Testimony from Steve Jackson

So, the star word I drew last year was “balance”. Some of you may not know what kind of schedule I’ve been keeping over the past few years. In addition to serving as the music director at First Christian Church, I’ve been teaching at four colleges, which has involved trips to Lincoln, IL two to three times per week as well as trips to Monmouth three to five times per week. I also have been playing regular Friday night jazz gigs in Peoria, performing with the Knox-Galesburg Symphony, playing other jazz gigs on some Saturday nights and, in the summer, Wednesday nights. I also have been directing the string program at Costa School (this sounds like I’m reading you my resume, right?).

When I showed Tracy my star word last year, she looked at it, nodded, and said something like “Yeah, you can definitely use some balance in your life”, to which I muttered something like “Sure, but how is that going to happen?” It turns out that God worked out a way (or, at the very least, circumstances came together to work out a way) for me to have to stop having to drive from place-to-place all throughout the week—at least for a time.

Now I should mention that I don’t want to make light of the coronavirus pandemic that has infected tens of millions and taken hundreds of thousands of lives in the U.S. alone. This is a grave situation, one about which I cannot in good conscience blithely say “Well, a lot of people are dying, but, hey, at least I’m home all the time with my family, and I’m saving a lot of money on gas now” (sounds pretty callous, right?). But in the light of grim circumstances God proves to us over and over that He is capable of showing the good, the glimmers of light, even in the midst of great tragedy. I have had more time at home—even now, while I again have to drive to Lincoln three times per week but am otherwise teaching online from home. I’ve been home with my family every Friday and Saturday night (with a few rare exceptions) for almost a year now. Now, the kids, being that they’re 17 and almost 13, don’t often care if I’m home or not—actually, that’s not true, since even if they don’t need me for anything a good portion of the time, they know they can count on me for whatever they might need, and sometimes we’ve been able to do something fun at home as a family.

So, I hadn’t drawn another star word until fairly recently. Actually I filled out the 7-word questionnaire found through a link on the church’s website. It came out as “believe”. I told Tracy this, and she said I should do it again, since she couldn’t imagine why I would need that word (she also admitted that she got that same word the first time she filled out the questionnaire, and then she did it again and got the word “comfort”, which she already talked about a few weeks ago—but she hadn’t said anything about repeating the process, so I’ve let that cat out of the bag now. Actually, as I read this to her now, she says she hadn’t really taken the time to consider the questions carefully, but the second time she took more time to absorb and answer the questions more thoughtfully). I filled it out again a few minutes before jotting all this down (a few days ago, as you are seeing me now), and guess what? I got the word “believe” once again. Now

what could be the reason why I would get that word twice? It obviously wasn't a random occurrence—I filled out the questionnaire and got that word both times.

We know these words will have whatever significance we impart to them. We can ignore our word—maybe some of us have forgotten what our word was from last year in January—or we can find some way in which this can impact our spiritual life. Well, here is my take on the word “believe” for me. I know in Whom I have believed (as one old hymn says), but lately my intellectual, skeptical adolescent children have taken to challenging and questioning our beliefs—their beliefs. I expected that this would happen at some point, especially with our kids. I challenged my atheistic upbringing, searched for meaning in my philosophy courses, came away feeling unsatisfied, and then found Truth (with a capital T) in Jesus Christ. Now our kids are raising some questions, with a rather philosophical bent, about our Christian beliefs, challenging me to respond with considered answers. I find that I must engage them with all my intellect and stand in my beliefs, the beliefs that we taught them as younger children but about which they still clearly feel compelled to come to an adult understanding. I must lean on God's everlasting arms, like Moses, to give me the words to continue to guide them. For me, the word “believe” isn't about me coming to Christ for the first time. It's about reaffirming my beliefs in a way that engages my kids, and anyone I encounter, to lead them to do the same. This year we'll see how God leads me in this.

Thank you, Steve! I for one look forward to hearing how that word “believe” will work throughout your spiritual life and in the sharing of your faith this coming year.

Did you hear how Steve referred to “leaning on the arms of God just like Moses did”? That image comes from the final words of Moses to the people of Israel, found in our text for today.

To set the stage for that passage, I want you to turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 32. Deuteronomy is in the Old Testament, the 5th book of the Bible – so, pretty close to the beginning of the Bible. We're just going to glance at this chapter – but there are a few verses there I don't want you to miss.

At Deuteronomy 31:30, we read that Moses recited this entire song to the whole assembly of Israel. Did you know Moses was a songwriter? We obviously don't know what the tune of this song is – but we do know it is a song of praise to God who is faithful, just and fair! He is the rock who surrounded and watched over Israel – guarding them with His own eyes. And the image I want you to see is found in verse 11. It says God is: *“Like an eagle that rouses her chicks and hovers over her young –He spread His wings to take them up and carried them safely on His pinions.”* When eaglets are ready to learn to fly – the parents nudge them out of the nest and force them to fly. But as those eaglets are “trying their wings”... they often start a free-fall. “Quickly, the adult bird sweeps under the eaglet and catches it, carrying it on one strong wing.”¹ This will be repeated time and time again, until the little bird knows how to fly.

This is a picture of God always being there for us – watching out for us – and carrying us, especially when we start to fall. And giving us the strength we need to learn to soar like the eagles!

Moses wrote this wonderful song as he neared the day of his death. At the end of chapter 32 we read that God tells Moses to go up to Mount Nebo, to view the Promised Land and then lay down and die. But before he died, Moses met with the people one more time – and again reminded them of the promises of God.

In chapter 33, Moses calls out each tribe of Israel and gives each one a blessing. In our Scripture reading for today, we will hear a blessing for the tribe of Asher – and then a final blessing for everyone. These words are timeless – and are of such encouragement and hope for you and me – just as they were for all the tribes of Israel, back some 35 hundred years ago.

Let's hear Deuteronomy 33:25-27 now.

(Leslie Wilt reads)

*²⁵The bolts of your gates will be iron and bronze,
and your strength will equal your days.*

*²⁶ “There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides across the heavens to help you
and on the clouds in his majesty. ²⁷ The eternal God is your refuge,
and underneath are the everlasting arms. He will drive out your enemies before you,
saying, ‘Destroy them!’ ²⁸ So Israel will live in safety;
Jacob will dwell secure in a land of grain and new wine,
where the heavens drop dew. ²⁹ Blessed are you, Israel!
Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD?
He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword.
Your enemies will cower before you, and you will tread on their heights.”*

Now what do these words all mean? Why are these words such great words of promise for us? Well, let's look first at those words *“the bolts of your gates will be iron and bronze.”* Some translations, particularly the King James Version says *“your shoes will be of iron and bronze”*. Whether it is the bolts of your gates or the shoes you wear – being made of iron and bronze both have to do with protection. Your gate to the city is only as strong as the bolts that keep the gate up. You have to have strong bolts – made of iron or bronze – so the gates will be strong and sturdy – not allowing the gate to be broken down easily by the enemy.

And if your *shoes* are made of iron or bronze, you will have strong protection for your feet as you walk on rocky, thorny roads. Our feet are tender and vulnerable, needing protection from the elements. Thus, we need strong shoes for protection and for perseverance.

Pastor Ray Pritchard, in commenting on this passage says this: *“Our text suggests that we may have some rough roads to travel before the year is done. If the way is to be flower strewn, velvet slippers will do. And if all we're going to do (this year) is sit and watch*

*television, we don't need iron shoes. Thick socks will do just fine. But if we plan to travel rocky roads, we need good footwear."*²

None of us know what this new year of 2021 will bring – but we can be assured that no matter what, the Lord will be with us and He will protect us. And he will give us exactly what we need, when we need it.

Look at the rest of verse 25. Moses says: *"Your strength will equal your days."* Notice that it says "days" not day. This is not just a promise for one day – but for many days! It is not just for today but for tomorrow and next week – and every day! It means that God will give us strength for every day and every *kind* of day – days of heartache and days of happiness, days of pain and days of praise. Whatever each day brings, God promises that there will be strength enough for the day. And what is so amazing is that God's strength will be for ALL our days, until we have no more days. In fact, I really believe that our days will run out before God's strength will run out! We don't have to fear anything today – or tomorrow – because, no matter what happens, God will give us the strength we need to get through it, if we just lean on Him!

I want you just for a moment to think about three things you are worried about for 2021 – things that you are concerned about or things that you fear. What is it that you are dreading or what are you anticipating that you might not be able to handle in the future? God has a promise that will cover each and every one of those worries and fears: Your strength will equal your days! When we put our trust in the Lord, there will never be a day when our strength is lacking! Your strength will always equal what kind of day you are having.

But wait, you say, "What about tomorrow? I'm worried about what might happen tomorrow." You don't have the strength for that yet. You get the strength you need for the day you need it – and it will be exactly what you need when you need it. You will get Monday's strength on Monday, and you don't get Tuesday's strength until Tuesday. And if you are worrying about Tuesday – you are trying to live in your own strength rather than waiting and depending on God to give you the strength you need on Tuesday.

We can trust that God will be there faithfully, each and every day, walking beside us and giving us the strength we need! What is most important is that we are trusting God and seeking Him first in our lives. Remember that's what Jesus said during the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in the book of Matthew. We are told not to worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Jesus says: *"Seek the Kingdom of God above all else and live righteously and He will give you everything you need."* (Matthew 6:34) Strength equal to your days!

It could be that you are thinking right now: you just don't understand all the stress and problems I am facing right now. They are huge. I don't know how I can get through all of this. I'm feeling buried under it all, weighed down, overwhelmed and definitely not full of strength.

Well – that is true - I don't know exactly how big your struggle is ... but I do know how big our God is – and I know He can be trusted to keep His promises. I also know that if you are

trying to handle your problems on your own, you will absolutely stagger under the load of it all. We need to claim the promise found in the rest of our text today in Deuteronomy: God rides across the heavens to help us – He comes to us and carries us through each and every day. The good news is that *“The eternal God is our refuge...and underneath of us, holding us up, are the everlasting arms of God!”* Everything might be falling down around us, our health may fail, our spirits may droop (Psalm 73:26) – but God will always be there – with His arms underneath us, giving us the strength we need! That promise is what will give us the power to get through it all.

Whenever we start to feel buried under or overwhelmed - we just need to remember that we are actually undergirded! Held in the everlasting arms of God who is our strength and our refuge.

You know it seems you and I can't even begin to predict what all will happen in 2021. 2020 was certainly an unpredictable and unprecedented year. Who knows what 2021 will bring? I can't predict that you and we won't find ourselves in troubled times and – facing a time of great stress and strain. But I can predict – without any hesitation – that you will have strength for each of your days! I predict that God will personally go ahead of you to prepare the way – and He will never fail you! I predict that God will walk beside you as your constant companion giving you the strength you need, just when you need it. And as you lean on His everlasting arms – you will have nothing to fear or dread! God will be there, holding your life! You can count on it!

BENEDICTION

*Go knowing that the Eternal God goes with you.
Holding you in His everlasting arms -
Urging you onward
Lifting you heavenward,
Giving you just enough for strength each and every day!*

RESOURCES

¹Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Old Testament Bible Commentary*, “Deuteronomy”.

²Ray Pritchard, *“Iron Shoes: God’s Promise for Every New Year”*, <https://2020.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2000-01-02-iron-shoes-gods-promise-for-every-new-year/>