

Strength to Endure

By the Rev. Dr. Paul S. Nancarrow

Years ago I made a pastoral call to a parishioner who was in the hospital after having some surgery. The surgery had gone pretty much okay, but there had been some complications, and that meant the recovery time was going to be longer, and there would be a few more issues on aftercare. It wasn't really *serious*, but it did make my friend kind of nervous and apprehensive. And then, she said, it wasn't just the surgery: it was all the things that went along with the surgery. Because she was in the hospital, her family's routines were disrupted, and her husband and her kids were all feeling their lives kind of shaken up and knocked out of normal. Because she was apprehensive about her recovery, her husband was also apprehensive; he wanted to do everything he could for her to help her heal faster and be well, but there was really nothing he could do, and it was difficult for him to feel helpless when he wanted so much to help. And of course there were projects around the house that weren't getting done, because everyone was focusing on her surgery and her recovery. And the people from her job had sent her such a very nice get-well card, but she was concerned that, with her gone, her tasks and her responsibilities weren't getting taken care of properly, and she was afraid she'd have a big huge mess to clean up once she did get back to work. All in all, she said, all these worries just piled up on her—having surgery was bad enough, she said, but all this other stuff just made it impossible. Then she looked at me and said, "I know God never gives us more than we can handle—but the next time you talk to God, could you tell him I've had just about enough?" And I said, "Sure. Why don't we tell him together." And then we took hands and prayed for a little while.

I thought of that conversation, and that prayer, when I read over the scripture lessons for today. Because what my friend said—that God never gives us more than we can handle—is a paraphrase of a verse from today's Epistle lesson. In this passage from his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength." That's what my friend was quoting. But Paul also adds a second clause to his sentence, he adds a companion thought to that saying—and it is the second clause, I think, that really makes the saying Good News. Paul says, "but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." With both of these thoughts together, Paul is creating here a balance between the sense of trial and tribulation that often comes in life, on the one hand, and on the other the strength that comes from God that gets us through trials and tribulations—not only gets us through, but transforms trial and tribulation into wisdom and compassion and joy and hope. Paul says that it is an undeniable part of life that we often feel tested—and it's worth pointing out here that the word in Greek that we translate "test" means more than just what the English word "test" means; it also carries the sense of bearing a burden, or being pressed down by something heavy and difficult to carry. I don't think that Paul is trying to invoke the vision of God sitting up in heaven, setting tests for us to see how we'll react, to see if we will measure up to divine standards. Instead, I think Paul is simply acknowledging that it is part of life that we often feel pressured, we often feel stressed, we often feel as though life puts heavy burdens on us that we must struggle to pick up and carry on. That kind of stress is simply part of being alive. But, says Paul, in the midst of that stress, God is also present: no matter how much life stresses us, God responds by giving us strength, by giving us courage, by showing us a *way*, so that we can go forward and we can endure.

The Good News, Paul says, is *not* that we will never feel pain; the Good News is *not* that nothing bad will ever happen to us; the Good News is that no matter how bad things get, no matter how much we feel stressed and pressured and burdened and weighted down, God will never leave us, God will never let us go, God will always give us the strength we need to confront our stresses and to transform them into hope. The Good News is not that bad things will never happen; the Good News is that, even when bad things do happen, in the end all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. The Good News is that God will not let us be tested beyond our strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out, with the burden God will also provide the strength, so that we may be able to endure it.

And that promise from the Epistle is illustrated in the story of Moses in our first lesson today. In this story, Moses is called by God to a mission, a mission to go to Pharaoh and tell Pharaoh to set God's people free. Moses knows this mission will be difficult: Moses knows that confronting Pharaoh, and convincing the Israelites to leave Egypt and the only life they've ever known, and facing the opposition he will meet at every turn—Moses knows this won't be easy. He knows it will stress him and pressure him and burden him—and he believes that he is not up to it, he thinks he is not capable of carrying all the weight this mission will place on him. So Moses tries, understandably enough, to get out of it. He says to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh? Sure, I grew up in Pharaoh's household, but that was a long time ago. I left Egypt under a cloud of suspicion, you know, and if I go back now, nobody will take me seriously. How could I possibly convince Pharaoh to let the people go? This is too much for me," Moses says, "I can't do it." But God replies, "I will be with you. You ask who you are to go to Pharaoh—and I say, you are the one who has God with him. And that will be enough for Pharaoh," God says. "And that should be enough for you."

But Moses still doesn't want to go; he still thinks he won't be able to bear it. "Suppose I go to the Israelites," Moses says to God, "and suppose I tell them 'God has sent me.' They're going to ask, 'What god?' They've been living with Egyptians; they're used to Osiris and Isis and Ra and Hathor. How can I convince them that a real god has sent me? This is too much for me," Moses says, "I can't do it." But God replies, "If the Israelites ask you what god has sent you, tell them you come from I AM WHO I AM, tell them the God who has sent you is Yahweh, the God of their ancestors and their God too. That will be enough for the Israelites," God says. "And that should be enough for you."

All through this story, Moses has several good reasons why he cannot carry out God's mission, he's got several excellent excuses for why he cannot bear the burden of doing what God calls him to do. But every time Moses says he cannot bear it, God promises to give him what he needs to be able to bear it. At every turn, God promises to empower Moses, so that the stress, the pressure of Moses' vocation will not be too much for him. So for Moses in this first lesson, the Good News is that God will not let him be tested, burdened, beyond his strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out, with the burden God will also provide the strength, so that Moses may be able to endure it, so that Moses may be able to do the work God gives him to do.

That's the Good News for Moses; that's the Good News for Paul and the Corinthians; and that is the Good News for us too. God calls us to mission and ministry; God calls us to represent God's word; God calls us to speak truth to power; God calls us to stand firm in Christ; God calls us to bear fruit worthy of repentance. God calls us to engage the gift of life with all the strength and mind and heart and soul we have. It's not always easy. Sometimes we wonder how we can go on. Like my friend after surgery; like a family struggling with a teenager going through difficult times; like an elder who said to me once, "Growing old is not for sissies"; like a church committing itself to new growth and challenged to find the resources to realize that growth—often in life the more we try to live fully alive in God, the more we run into stress and pressure and resistance and tests. That much is unavoidable. But the Good News is that we are not alone in those tests, the Good News is that we don't have to bear those burdens by ourselves; for us too, the Good News is that God will not let us be tested beyond our strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that we may be able to endure it.

In this Lenten season of devotion and discipline and testing, let us hold fast to that Good News, and let us endure in the promise of God's strength, and let us look with hope to fulfillment of all our work in Christ. Amen.