

# Sermon Text for February 28, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

*Psalm 2:10-12, Philippians 2:12-18*

*“Fight the good fight”*

So three years ago Stacy and I crossed a threshold when we sent Bethany off to college and came home to an empty house. It was okay, we spent time together hiking the Appalachian trail and any time the girls came home or we would go visit them it was a real bonus. A year ago we had a full house again, all of our girls were home, sometimes with friends, so until we dropped Bethany back at college just less than a month ago our house was busy with activity and we had no sense of feeling isolated at all during this pandemic, a feeling that I know many of you are experiencing acutely. Life had changed, but we had our girls with us, it was okay. Over this past month Stacy and I have commented on how much we are missing now more than ever the women’s Bible Study, our young couples gatherings and the many aspects of church life that make church alive.

It has caused me to wonder what is it that keeps our faith, our own individual faith, not the faith of the church, the faith that has been passed down through the centuries, but what is it that keeps your faith alive? Without a doubt our communion together as brothers and sisters in Christ plays a huge role in maintaining and strengthening that faith. If that is the case then during this pandemic as we have been apart have we inevitably experienced a drop, a decrease, a weakening in our own individual faith simply because we have not experienced the joy of community together like we were used to?

Over this week I have realized that often what gives us encouragement and determination to fight the good fight with all that is going on is a cheering section of people who we know is on our side as we face the challenges in front of us. That cheering section is you, the church plays the role of encouraging and strengthening and lifting up each other. We have tried to do that with mailings and phone calls, but as you have all said, it is not the same when we are not together. Today I want to provide another opportunity to reflect upon our faith in the midst of this pandemic and give you some encouragement as you fight the good fight.

As we ease our way back into worship we are going to begin next Sunday our final Challenge as we make our way through Scripture. The Word of God has to serve as a tool, as an instrument to combat the malaise that we might experience in our faith during this time. Read the Word of God and combat whatever sense of downer you might be experiencing. We are going to finish up the Bible together starting this next Sunday and finishing up on Pentecost

Sunday. Can you believe that we have made our way through the Bible together with our challenges? We started 5 years ago and here we find ourselves today. This is kind of our second time together through Scripture. Do you remember that year, I think it was 2012 when we read through the Bible in 78 hours during holy week?

Both of our Scriptures today point us to working out our salvation, looking at our relationship with God, that self-reflection that I talked about, with fear and trembling, with a sense of discernment where we discover that it is not by bread alone, it is not by our determined ego where we want to do our own things no matter what impact it has on those around us. The following of Scripture provides us with a path for now and a legacy for those who follow.

### **READ**

If you look at the very first verse in our second Scripture you see this term “fear and trembling” used as Paul refers to our understanding of our salvation and as we contemplate our salvation. As we come face to face with God we ought to analyze and consider our faith. Where are we today on our faith journey? Where are you today on your faith journey? The assumption is that as we consider that our approach ought to be one of humility, hence the fear and trembling component. We see that term fear and trembling used often in Scripture in referring to people who come face to face with God and so are forced to examine themselves and see where they are in relationship with God.

It is often used of those who are not included in the people of God and come face to face with the power and the presence of God. So in Exodus 15:16 and then again in Isaiah 19:16 you see the Egyptians who are confronted with the leaving Israelites after the plagues had struck their nation and as they see the Israelites leave they were struck with fear and trembling. The assumption is that as they watch a people leave a slavery under which they had placed them, and as they realize that God was really on their side and that their status before God was very questionable, they were seized with fear and trembling. If you are not on the right side of God, you ought to fear and tremble.

That is the point of our first Scripture where the Psalmist encourages the foreign nations to recognize that God has promised salvation to His people and anyone seen fighting against that promise is going to be destroyed. They are confronted with the fact that God’s promises will be accomplished and so it forces them to come face to face with the question am I working with God or am I working against God? The Psalmist says serve the Lord with fear and trembling. You better be found on God’s side.

We see the same idea in the New Testament when Jesus is raised from the dead and you know it had to be a very traumatic experience for those soldiers watching his grave in Matthew 28:4 where we read that when they experienced the presence of the Lord, when they came face to face with God and that question was asked of them, where is your faith, are you working with me or against me, they were paralyzed with fear and trembling.

In this Scripture in Philippians Paul is asking us that as we discern where our faith is, look at vs.16 and as you self-reflect a way in which to know where you find yourself along the faith continuum is what role does Scripture play in your life? He says that I know that you are people of faith, I know that you love God even in the midst of this mess in which we find ourselves, because, you are holding fast to the Word of life and I can boast and brag on you to others because I know where your faith is.

He uses words here that are not foreign to us in Paul's writings. He is writing here and encouraging people to think about where they are in their faith, almost as if this might be his last request of them, ever. When he says in vs.17 that he is being poured out as a sacrifice those are words that people use when they know that their days are numbered. He uses this same image in another letter that he writes, this one to Timothy. Look at II Timothy 4:6-7, and it is actually from this verse where we get our sermon title: As for me I am already being poured out as a sacrifice, or a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

If our lives were being asked of us today, if we were to be poured out as a sacrifice today for God's sake, could we say those words that Paul stated: I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, have we kept the faith? If nothing else at all, is our focus still on fighting the good fight which is a fight to maintain the faith until we actually finish the race, or have our interests and our focus shifted away from the Gospel race and found itself squarely on other battles on other fights that actually detract from the faith that we profess and that we have confessed in the past as being primary.

Paul actually surprises us by joy again in these verses, look at vs.17 and 18 where he says that he will be able to rejoice in the final day because he can look back at the church in Philippi and know that whether he ever sees them again or not, their focus has not shifted even in the midst of the most difficult times, away from the Word of life, away from the Word of God which provides them with the incentive and the desire to fight the good fight. The joy Paul is able to express comes from knowing that the focus of the church has never wavered no matter what was

happening around them. He says he can look back and know for certain that what they have done has not been in vain.

Has our work together ever been in vain? Is it too soon to look back over these last 12 months, over these last 10 years, over these last 188 years and ask that question? It would be in vain if our focus had shifted, it would not be in vain if we maintained our focus on the Word of God as that which guides and directs us. Paul tells us to fight the good fight now and that a way in which to do that is to maintain the principle role of Scripture, this Word of life of vs.16, being able to hold fast to that.

The Christian hymn extolling Christ the servant from last week will have its completion only in the obedience of the congregation to the Word of God. Christian life is not just how you think about things but it is effort and work and action and determination. The people of God are not called just to survive but to take the initiative and be the shining lights in the world. The church is to actualize in concrete ways the mind of Christ. Amen.