

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Keeping Perspective”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 33–November 17, 2019

Lessons: Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Some of you may remember the powerful documentary of the Civil Rights Movement called *Eyes on the Prize*. The title of course comes from a song: *Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*. The best known version tells the story of Paul and Silas in Acts.

Paul and Silas, bound in jail
Had no money for to go their bail
Keep your eyes on the prize,
hold on...hold on.

Paul and Silas began to shout
Doors popped open, and all walked out
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on...hold on.

Well, the only chains we can stand
Are the chains between hand and hand
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on....hold on.

In the singing of this song, all kinds of people kept perspective in the midst of incredibly difficult times. Kyle Childress speaks of a time in the Spring of 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. “It looked as if the civil rights movement would suffer yet another defeat. The powers that be had more jail space than the civil rights workers had people. But then one Sunday, reports historian Taylor Branch, 2,000 young people came out of worship at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church and prepared to march. The police were shocked. How much longer was this going to go on? How many more people were they going to have to arrest? The line of young people was five blocks long. As the marchers approached the line of police officers and dogs, the notorious Bull Connor walked out to confront them, shouting for the firemen to turn on the hoses.

“The line of young people came close—face-to-face with Connor and the firemen and police. Then they knelt and prayed. The Rev. Charles Billups stood and shouted, “Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here ‘til we die!” After a few moments, Billups and the young people walked forward, and the firemen parted for them to pass. Onlookers said it was as if the Red Sea had parted for the children of Israel.”¹

Childress asks, “What kind of church does it take to nurture Christians capable of standing like that? What does it take to live out the new creation and endure the struggles, the disappointments and the hostility that Christians and churches face when they do so?”² Our passages from Isaiah and Luke offer a suggestion. Right now, in the midst of all the troubles we know in our world and in our lives, right now God is doing a new thing. We may not face hoses and dogs, but we know about suffering and persecution. We know about betrayal and carrying heavy burdens. Right now, God is

¹ Kyle Childress, Sunday, November 14, 2010: Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19 in *The Christian Century*. November 2, 2010 Vol. 127, No. 22. © 2010.

² *Ibid.*

creating new heavens and a new earth where there will be no more hurting or destroying anywhere. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

God's vision for the world is one where everyone has a place to live, everyone has food to eat. In God's world there is no more crying, no more distress. Babies grow up and live out full lives; God's world is a place where lion and ox, wolf and lamb actually eat together, not each other. God is creating something new where the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad, Isaiah proclaims, and rejoice forever in what God is creating; for God is about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. Do you have the eyes to see that reality? In the midst of all the problems that we face, can we find the perspective that allows us to stand tall celebrating our full humanity?

Of course, this isn't easy. Jesus warns his followers that when you keep perspective, when you keep your eyes on the prize, when you stand for justice and righteousness, people will call you names. They will suggest you are uninformed or naive. They will write you off. They will persecute you. They will betray you. It will not be easy. He also reminds us that we don't know when God will bring this new heaven and earth into full fruition. We just know that God will. So in the midst of what ever suffering you may know, remember this: not one hair on your head will perish. By your endurance, you will gain your souls. Keep perspective. Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.

We live in scary times when too many lambs and oxen are devoured by wolves and lions. We've lived through another school shooting. We have friends who are suffering and know too many who are sick. Some days I'm ready to give up, to give in to despair. Some days I'm just afraid, but I read this week of a favorite 12-step acronym for times like ours: "F.E.A.R. is Forgetting Everything's All Right."³ Yet even now, in the world we know, God is creating new heavens and a new earth. Can you see it? Keep your eyes on that reality.

Here in this corner of the kingdom, you can make a difference in the life of someone else. I suspect every one of us knows someone who is struggling, someone ready to give into despair, someone who is feeling utterly alone. Help them to know that even right now God is creating something new. Help them to discover that God hears even before they start calling. Give them the perspective, as we sang earlier today, that we lean on everlasting arms that keep us safe and secure from all alarms. Whatever difficulty or suffering you may know, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on. Hold on.

Let us pray: "Lord God, once more we come before your throne of grace to call upon your holy name. We thank you that you watched over us all night while we slumbered and slept. We thank you that we were able to get up clothed in our right mind and able to breathe each and every breath you have given us. We thank you that you have called us together today in this community of faith. We thank you for the voices of the choir. We thank you for creating something new in us. We thank you for your perspective on the world, where wolf and lamb can actually sit down together. O God, send us the power of your Holy Spirit. You know the battle is hard and the journey is long. We can't make it without you."⁴ Give us the strength to keep our eyes on the prize and hold on. In the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

³ Katie Givens Kime, Sunday, November 17, 2013: Isaiah 65:17-25 in *The Christian Century*. November 13, 2013 Vol 130, No. 23. © 2013.

⁴ Kyle Childress, Sunday, November 14, 2010: Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19 in *The Christian Century*. November 2, 2010 Vol. 127, No. 22. © 2010.