



The Westminster Pulpit

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

“...that they should set their hope in God”
Sermon on Hebrews 11:39 – 12:2

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150th Anniversary of Westminster Presbyterian Church

Guy read, “Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”

The choir sang that we would tell God’s story “to our children and our children’s children so that they may set their hopes on God.”

Now hear from the Preacher of Hebrews.

Hebrews 11:39 – 12:2

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

We will not hide the stories of God; we will tell them to our children and our children’s children so that they might set their hopes on God.

On our 150th birthday of Westminster, we pour the water into the font and celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism. Those waters hold our stories. We need to tell those stories to our children and our children’s children so that they might set their hopes in God.

What a gift it has been in my life to celebrate so many baptisms! To be there, with the baby in my arms and the water is so wonderful. Not every pastor has a church that has a baptism almost every month. Some never touch the waters of baptism for years, and I've had so many. I have had the gift of seeing, testifying, and celebrating the love that God has for us. Before we know it. Before we are able to utter a word to say, "I love you, God!" - God loves us. It is seen in that baptism. We love because God first loved us.

The celebration of baptism that there's nothing we can do to make God love us anymore and there's nothing we can do to make God love us any less. God is here in the baptism.

In a world where too many children are bullied, in a world where we are more connected to our devices than the ones whom we're supposed to love, in a world where social media is for some reason bent on saying, "Your life is not good enough, your life is not 'liked' enough," we should tell our children to set their hopes in God, that God loves them.

These waters hold their stories.

They hold the story of creation. Listen as the water is poured into the font. There was a day when God's breath blew over the waters, claiming that "this is the day that the Lord has made." Surely, you know that day. Surely, there was a morning that has broken, where you stood at the edge of the water, the sun is rising and shimmering. The beauty of it all brings a prayer. "This is the day the Lord has made, and we need to be part of it. We need to tell our children about how we see each day, and how precious it is. We can't hide that from our children. I believe we are great mysteries to one another. Part of life is the joy of unpacking the mysteries of the other. "Oh, I understand where he's coming from!"

I think I will always be on a quest to understand my mother and father. If only they had given me a few more clues. Told a few more stories. "Mom, Dad, what are you thinking?" If only I had asked.

I am thinking about a memory I have of my son. We had just moved to Nashville. It was interesting moving here with older, teenage children. They had no friends here, just Mom and Dad, so we spent time together. That was actually a blessing, to be with my kids and to share in that time of starting over with them. We were going on a bike ride over to the park, he was not yet 20, and could ride the hills much faster than I could. What I remember is that whenever he got to the top of a hill, he'd wait for me. Every time he would head around a corner to disappear, he would always look back my way. Every time. I can still see him glancing back on every corner, as if to make sure, "My Dad is alright." I've spent my life hoping my kids are alright, and now I see this glance of love. I don't know that I've ever shared that with my son, but I sure need to because there is something in there that is of the glorious gospel. Something that we need to tell our children, and our children's children.

You can hear in the waters life and death. We had a funeral service on Friday, a Baptism now complete. Life and death. I remember Phil Kearney coming back from a vacation at the beach. He said, "I went out swimming and got caught in a riptide. And I got pushed out far from shore and they tell you not to fight it, but when you're in it you think you can fight it." He said, "I got worn out, and I could see my wife and my two girls on the beach, and they were enjoying themselves. I thought to myself 'This is my last image of my family. This is how it is going to end.'" And right then his toe caught some sand, and he was able to push up and soon he was on a sandbar way out in the ocean. Alive! He said, "I was never more grateful about life at that moment." And he said, "You need to be grateful, too, because you don't have to do my

funeral.” I laughed, but what I wanted to say was, “Phil, I’m so glad to have you in my life, my friend. Because if you were gone, I would have a hole in my heart the size and shape of you.” These are the stories we need to share with one another, friend to friend. We can’t hide them. These are words that we can’t keep from our children or our children’s children. The relationships that we have as friends – they’re are our life vests of salvation. They help us get through these days. We need to share these stories so that our children can set their hopes on God.

The waters will pour, and you will hear the stories. If you listen, the stories are in the waters. Like the story of when the sky grew dark, and the future looked bleak.

Can you imagine being in this Sanctuary on December 7th, 1941? That was a Sunday morning. In my imagination, I see every eye and every prayer was on any teenage boy in the congregation that day. I see a mother holding on for dear life. I see a father trying to keep the fear and tear away. We gather, and when we fall to pieces, we need to be in communion with one another.

I remember the Sanctuary on the evening of September 11, 2001. After the towers fell, we made a phone tree, and called everyone in the church. By 7:00 p.m., the Sanctuary was as full as it has ever been. Even more so than on Christmas Eve. The chaos of that day was met by the words, “Our God, our help in ages past, our hope in years to come...Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.” We needed those words. We needed to tell our children that those words exist so that when their world is rocked, they have a place to come to. A rock that they built their house on.

I don’t know whether faith makes us say those words or whether the words make us have some faith. I don’t know. But I’m so grateful that the Lord is in the boat in the midst of the storms.

Maybe we should tell our children that, so they can set their hopes on God.

We think of glorious deeds such as seas that split in two, or manna from heaven, or walking on water. But the truth is that those events come rarely in life. But the glorious deeds of the Lord can also come in those times when we try to walk on water, believing we’re something powerful, and then we fail.

Life has a long list of not getting the time right, the tone right, the words right. Fail, fail, fail. That’s when the glory of God comes with a hand to lift us up. Salvation. It comes from those people who show us just a little mercy, a little understanding. It comes from those people who sacrifice a little of themselves just for the hope of you. Would it hurt to call those people in our lives who have saved us? Would it hurt to tell a child that there is grace in this world? And that they have it and can give it? So that this world might set their hopes in God.

Sins die in these waters. Listen to the waters.

I think it is fitting that on our 150th celebration Sunday, we pause to see and hear the waters of our baptism. 150 years! I’ve only been here for 13 years of it, and yet, I’m all in!

Susan Hassell and her committee are to be commended for the work they’ve done lifting up the stories. One of my favorite things has been seeing the wedding pictures. So young! So beautiful. Wow! Looking back on history!

I found it in the 1973 bulletin for the celebration of the 100th anniversary. Hartley Hall was the preacher, and the title of the sermon was titled "The Next 100 Years." And I immediately emailed the preacher's son and said, "Hartley, can you find that sermon?" He had all his dad's sermons...except for that one. Shoot! I was just going to take that sermon and read it!

The more I wondered what that sermon was about, the more I knew what that sermon was about. It wasn't Hartley's prediction of the future. I mean, who would have guessed in 1973 that the Iron Curtain would fall? Who was thinking that the newly built Twin Towers would come to such an awful end? Or, that the cell phone would change everything? Or a pandemic would empty the house of the Lord? You can't predict the future.

The more I thought about that sermon, the more I thought, oh yeah, you can predict the future. The next 100 years. It's in that water. We know what tomorrow brings. We know. Tomorrow brings grace, tomorrow brings hope, and salvation, and love. We know.

It's been an unusual year. We re-cast a vision of this church. We asked you what you want to see in this church. And do you know what you said? You said you wanted to go back to that water. You said Acts, chapter 1! You went back to the stories of faith, that we want to be a church that radically includes everyone. That's right out of Acts. Do you remember that?

These people who are on fire for Jesus go out into the world trying to figure out who they're going to baptize, and they come up with a gentile! A gentile! "Lord, you're not going to ask me to baptize a gentile, are you, Lord?" The Spirit said, "Baptize a gentile; we're going to include everyone." Women. "Are we going to allow women to be baptized in the church? Do you know what's going to happen?" Great things! Amazing things! Thank God they didn't listen to their heads but listened to the Spirit of God in the water, and women came into the church. They came across an Ethiopian Eunuch. Nothing says diversity like an Ethiopian Eunuch. Are you kidding me? Look there's no water. Well, yes, there's some water.

We want to be a church that welcomes all. We want to be a church of reconciliation. We want to be a church that is the light in the darkness. What a nice thing to be a part of. Having that for our vision for this year that's going to be an election year? Oh, I'm so looking forward to an election year!

So, here's a little something for you to do. Every time you talk about your political candidate, or the other candidate, you need to figure out how you're going to articulate your faith in God. Fill those sentences up with your faith in God. Ceasars come and go, empires rise and fall but the Word of the Lord lasts forever, and the Word of the Lord is going to uphold your children from this time forth. Hallelujah and amen!

You said you want this place to be a light. Well, be a light. We'll work on this together.

You said that you'd like this place to transform you, change you. Into what? Into whom? Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who didn't look at the world as, "give me give me," but he emptied himself. Emptied himself! That's what we're about here. It's what made this church live 150 years and it will live for another 150 years... 1,000 years. It will live for eternity. And it will set our children's hope in God.