

Letter to a Teenager

Introduction:

This morning I'm speaking to you from an almost empty church building as we are dealing with the beginnings of what the World Health Organization has called a Pandemic. As you would have heard, we have suspended our public gatherings so that we can help to prevent the spread of the virus and keep it from taking deep root in our area. You'll be hearing more about what we will be doing as a church to continue to love, care for and reach out to our community over the next few days and weeks.

There's a lot that I'd like to say to you today. I'd like to talk about choosing faith over fear; learning how to trust God even when others are panicking around you. I'd like to talk about choosing love over selfishness; choosing to share and help when many are hoarding and looking only to their own interests. However, the message for today was written a few weeks ago, and I think it is still appropriate today. The first line I wrote was...

Is there hope? We live in an ever more complex world. Situations and challenges that our young people face were not even the stuff of imagination a century, even a generation ago. Yet here we are. I'm speaking today primarily to the youth and young adults in our community. My message is entitled "Letter To a Teenager," and it's in response to a letter I received a few years ago from a teenager as well as some of my own observations.

What are you dealing with today? Anorexia, bulimia, cutting, low self-esteem, obsessive compulsive disorder, ADD, ADHD, depression, abuse, peer pressure, a broken relationship, family problems, bullying, addiction, gender dysphoria, anxiety, or are you just trying to find yourself in a big dangerous world. There are a gazillion other things that teenagers and others find themselves faced with in this day and age. Sometimes it's just not fun.

As I was reading the letter I received I looked back on my own teenage years. I remember a great deal of confusion, fear, anxiety, a lot of what was expressed in the letter. I remember feeling very alone, and thinking that there was no-one who understood what I was going through. I also remember thinking that I didn't have what it takes to make it in this world. I couldn't picture myself succeeding. There were enough people who had put me down that I began to believe what they had said about me.

I walked away from the church because of the questions that I was wrestling with and because few of my friends thought church was a good idea. I wanted to go back to childhood where life was simpler, but that wasn't possible. Everything was changing so rapidly and I didn't think I was ready for those changes. I became even lonelier because then I felt like I was failing God. That led me into hopelessness, because if God was mad at me, could there be a way out? Like many people I had thoughts of suicide, but something kept me from following through.

I said all of that to say this. I recognize that the world is even crazier now than it was then, but I also know something for a fact, whether or not you believe in God, God believes in you. I want to challenge you this morning to start to change the focus of your attention. When I was a teenager it felt like everyone was watching me. It was like everything I did was so incredibly important. Everything that happened was about me and affected me somehow. I took so much on myself. So when I say to change your perspective, I mean to stop looking in the mirror, stop interpreting every situation as if it was about you - and look up.

I want to look at a section of Scripture this morning found in Psalm 40:1-3 which I think is relevant to each of us at times in our lives. *"I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD."*

Some of you listening today feel like you're in a pit. You might have climbed down yourself, fallen in by accident or life threw you in, but there you are. This is the way that I felt in my mid-teens. Not only was I stuck; I thought that I'd always be stuck.

In the book of 2 Samuel we find a story about King David that is not very well known. He was anointed to be king of Israel while just a kid. This event occurred after David was well entrenched on the throne of Israel; after he had expanded its territories. He was entering middle age and now had grown children himself. In chapters 15-17 we read of how his son, Absalom, betrayed his own father. He first lied about him, convincing people that their king – David - didn't care about them. Then he won his way into their hearts by helping them himself; building up a group of people who had loyalty only to him. 2 Samuel 15:6 tells us that Absalom *"stole the hearts of the men of Israel."*

After he laid all the groundwork, he left Jerusalem, the capital, for Hebron and

called all to him those who were willing to follow. When King David heard of what was happening, his first thought was that his son would return and destroy Jerusalem if he stayed to fight him, so he took his family and those soldiers loyal to him, and marched out into the desert. Even his own senior advisor turned against him.

So here's the picture. King David is out in the desert wilderness with his family and some of his soldiers while his son, Absalom, now controls Jerusalem and has declared himself king. He has raised an army of thousands and has set himself on killing his own father. It is at this time that scholars believe David wrote Psalm 40, our text for this morning. The Psalm could have applied to many times in David's life, and ours as well. He paints a very vivid word picture. It is a picture of helplessness.

In the case of King David, this was a mess that was largely of his own making. He had allowed his family to get out of control to such a point that they were turning on each other. Now the result was an open revolt. David was in real trouble and he'd allowed his entire kingdom to be put in jeopardy.

Let's look at what David did, according to Psalm 40. It begins, "*I waited patiently for the Lord...*" The Hebrew actually emphasizes the waiting by saying it like this: "In waiting, I waited patiently for the Lord..." "Wait" comes from the root words for "tension" and "endurance." It conveys the feeling that David was experiencing. There was a very real sense of helplessness. This is why David speaks of a slimy pit and being caught in the mud and mire.

There are sometimes in our lives that are very messy. The teen years are usually like that. Try as you like, you can't help but get dirty from them, and you can't seem to find a way out by yourself. You have fallen into a pit. You try to climb up the walls but they're muddy and slippery and you cannot get a firm grip. At the same time, your feet are slipping and sliding in the muck and the mire. What we realize, at moments like that is that we're helpless. What do we do at times like that?

I've seen numerous responses. I've known some who have simply cursed their situation, and often cursed God, and beat their fists against the walls until they were spent. I've known others who have simply given up and sat down to die. But I've also known those who chose to do what David did. Even though he'd blown it. Even though he brought much of this on himself, he waited patiently for the Lord. Elton Trueblood wrote that "*Nothing influences the quality of our life more than*

how we respond to trouble.”

It says that David waited “patiently” for the Lord. Hadley tells us that *“patience means the readiness to await God’s time without doubting God’s love.”*

What is the result then, for King David, of waiting on the Lord? Let’s look to the first three verses of Psalm 40. David’s part is clear and to the point - he waited patiently. Now what does God do?

1. He turns.

David paints a picture of God’s response to hurting people over the next few verses. This response is not for everybody; it is for those who look for Him. When we look to God to meet our needs - He responds. How does He respond?

He responds firstly by turning His attention towards us. The God of all heaven, the Creator of all things, all-powerful God focuses His attention on us. As Ravi Zacharias writes, *“God is not just the God of power in creation; He is the God of presence in our affliction.”* The God of the Bible doesn’t just turn...

2. He hears.

David said, *“He heard my cry.”* God hears the cry of our hearts. He knows your situation. He knows exactly what you’re going through. Even when you can’t feel Him, He’s there. Even greater than what David experienced, we who live on the other side of the cross have the invitation given to us by Jesus: *“Come unto Me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11:28)

This morning I want to speak to the doubters among you and I want to challenge you to trust God. Though your situation may seem difficult, though it might even seem hopeless, if you’ll trust in God He turns to you, He hears you and...

3. He lifts.

David said, *“He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and the mire.”* He did for him what David couldn’t do for himself. This is where self-made men and women fall. There will come a time in your life when all of your best efforts will not be enough. If you are unwilling to humble yourself before God and ask for help you are on your own. James tells us that *“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”*

We have to understand that sometimes our difficulties are meant to point us to the One who is able to help us. As Max Lucado writes, *“Sometimes storms of life come to teach us that God is in control, that we must lean on Him ...”*

4. He sets.

In verse 2 David tells us that *“...He set my feet on a rock...”* God has the power to alter our situations. There isn't a worse feeling for some of us than the feeling of being out of control. But what a contrast here. One moment David sees himself wallowing around in a pit, unable to maintain his balance; unable to free himself from his muddy prison. The next he finds himself standing upon a rock.

In the New Testament, Jesus is identified as that Cornerstone that has been laid by God upon which everything that stands must be built. Jesus Christ is our rock. What a wonderful experience we find when we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and have this incredible sense that we now have a foundation. For, not only does God set us on a rock...

5. He gives.

David writes that *“He gave me a firm place to stand.”* God knows you. He knows everything about you. He knows where you belong; where you fit. He knows best how to use your gifts and your talents and abilities because He gave them to you in the first place. The apostle Paul wrote that God *“has set us in the church as it has pleased Him.”* He gives us a firm place to stand.

What does that word “firm” mean? It's not a weak word. It's not a shaky stance. It's a word that signifies strength and stability. When we stand where God has put us, who can knock us off our feet?

6. He puts.

He puts a new song in our mouth - a song of praise. Songs of praise come from thankful hearts. The song comes naturally when we look around and see what God has done for us. We also see that the song is not just for us. The verse goes on to say that, *“Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.”*

So what?

Some of you may be asking the question – how do I know that God can be trusted

with my life? How do I know that He is reliable? The answer for me is found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are just about to head into the Easter season when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. If you read the Bible, you see that the days leading up to that first Easter Sunday were not good days.

Jesus found Himself first wrestling with His own emotions, knowing what lay ahead of Him. He submitted to God the Father's plan, even though it would cost Him dearly. He was betrayed by one of His closest friends. He was arrested on trumped up charges. He was beaten and tortured; put through the mockery of a trial. He was abandoned by most of His friends, and finally put to death in the cruelest method the Romans could devise; one that guaranteed the maximum amount of pain and humiliation. He was then laid in a borrowed tomb; guarded by Roman soldiers. But it didn't end there.

The resurrection is the cornerstone of Christianity. As Thomas Arnold, who held the chair of modern history at Oxford University said, *"I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose from the dead."*

What is the evidence for the resurrection?

a. His absence from the tomb

The fact is that Jesus' body was gone. This was confirmed by friend and foe alike. What are the possible explanations?

- **Maybe He didn't really die.** The swoon theory. He only fainted on the cross and revived in the cool air of the tomb. What are the details? He had undergone flogging that, in itself, killed many people. He had been crucified - people didn't survive crucifixion. Plus there was a stone estimated at 1 ½ tons rolled in front of His tomb which was guarded by Roman soldiers. John 19:33-34 tells us that when the soldiers ran a spear through His side to ensure His death, blood and water flowed out. Modern science has proven that the separation of clot and serum indicates death.
- **Maybe the disciples or robbers stole the body.** Then the disciples simply made up the story of seeing Jesus alive. But remember, the tomb was guarded. The disciples were discouraged and depressed, hardly in a mood to fight Roman guards. Something happened to them that made them willing to

die for their claim that Christ rose. What was it if not the truth? And if robbers broke in why would they leave the grave clothes - the only thing of value in the tomb?

b. His presence with the disciples

Some claim that the disciples never really saw Jesus, they were simply hallucinating. But psychiatrists will tell you that hallucinations do not happen in groups, they are subjective - not objective. Luke 24:36-43 provides a very objective experience which the disciples shared. Jesus actually ate with them, hardly a mirage or imagination.

c. The transformation of the disciples and the birth of the church

There is no parallel in the history of the world of anything like what happened with the early church - the explosive growth of this small organism; the incredible influence exerted over centuries of time. Also we see the willingness of its followers to surrender their lives, not to blow somebody else up, but to demonstrate their love for their accusers and their God. Why would Jesus' followers lay down their lives if they knew that they were lying? Something convinced them that He was indeed risen.

d. Christian experience throughout history

Millions of Christians (including this one) can tell you that their lives have been truly changed by His presence. I know that Christ is alive because I've experienced His working in my life.

Conclusion:

I started this message with a question, is there hope? I ended it with the evidence for the resurrection. In his book Jesus the King, Timothy Keller finishes with this: *"The gospel is the ultimate story that shows victory coming out of defeat, strength coming out of weakness, life coming out of death, rescue from abandonment. And because it is a true story, it gives us hope because we know life is really like that."*

"It can be your story as well. God made you to love him supremely, but he lost you. He returned to get you back, but it took the cross to do it. He absorbed your darkness so that one day you can finally and dazzlingly become your true self and take your seat at his eternal feast."

God has a plan for you. Are you going through dark times? Many are. The Resurrection reminds you to keep going.

Lift your eyes.
Hold onto God.
Step over the obstacles.

Prayer

Benediction:

Prayer during a Pandemic (author unknown)

May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close, remember those who have no options.

May we who cancel our trips remember those who have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our country, let us choose love.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around one another, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors.

Amen.