Don’t Lose Heart!

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at Light Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore,
on Sunday, June 5, 2016.

2 Corinthians 4:1-15

By now I hope that most of you have received either an email or a letter in the
mail communicating some important news. If not, what I am about to say will
probably come to you as quite a shock. And for that I apologize.

The news is that last Sunday I received and accepted a new call to serve as pastor
of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It’s one thing
to write those words in a letter, it’s another thing to say them out loud! Let’s all
take a collective deep breath.

While I am excited about moving to the Southwest and beginning a new chapter
in my ministry, it means having to face the hard reality that I now have to say
goodbye to you. And after serving with you in ministry for the past 12 years, that
will be no small feat. I have come to love this congregation. We’ve been through
a lot together. I’ve baptized some of your children. I’ve baptized some of you as
adults. I’ve married some of you and some of your children. And when members
and friends of this congregation have died, I have presided at their memorial
services to celebrate their lives and give witness to the promise of resurrection.
We’ve become close to one another. We’ve become family.

Fortunately, we have some time to say goodbye. I met with the Session this past
Thursday and asked that my last Sunday at Light Street be July 10, 2016, and that
the Presbytery of Baltimore be asked to dissolve the pastoral relationship
effective July 31, 2016. The Session has called a Congregational Meeting for next
Sunday, June 12, immediately following worship, to act upon that request.

Susan and I will be in Portland, Oregon, June 16-25, to attend the 222nd General
Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), but we will return to Baltimore and
to Light Street Church for three more Sundays to say our final goodbyes.

During the interim period, the Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry will work
with the Session to find transitional leadership to give you the time you need to
discern how best to meet the pastoral needs of the congregation in the future.

I know that many of you are saddened by the news that Susan and I will be
leaving Light Street Church. And some of you may feel anxious about Light
Street’s future. That’s why I’m grateful that the Narrative Lectionary gives us this
morning’s reading from Second Corinthians. It is so perfect for this moment in
the life of this congregation. I couldn’t have picked a more appropriate passage if
I’d tried.

Paul writes this to the church in Corinth: “since it is by God’s mercy that we are
engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” Paul focuses on God as the
impetus behind the church’s ministry. It’s not about Paul. It’s about God. The Corinthians’ ministry doesn’t depend on Paul. It depends on God. Paul helped to establish the church in Corinth, but then left to continue on his missionary journeys to establish other churches around the Mediterranean.

What Paul did, and what all preachers are supposed to do, is direct our attention to God in Jesus Christ. That’s why I so rarely tell stories about myself in my sermons. They’re not supposed to be about me, they’re supposed to be about God. As Paul puts it: “we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.” It is God “who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. . . . this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

So when Paul left the church in Corinth, the power of God didn’t leave with him. It remained with the Corinthians. When I leave this church on Light Street, the power of God will not leave with me. It will remain here with you.

Please don’t say to yourselves, “well, Roger is leaving Light Street, so I guess I’ll leave, too, at least until the church finds a new pastor.” It’s not about me, it’s about God and your relationship to God through Jesus Christ. I did not proclaim myself, I proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord. This is not the time to fall away from the church and go our separate ways. This is the time to draw even closer to one another as a church family and to support and uphold one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. You are Light Street Church. Without you, without your participation and involvement, there is no Light Street Church. You’re it!

“Since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.”

It was more than a decade ago that I first traveled to our sister church in Cuba. I was struck by how difficult life was in Cuba at that time. Most Cubans I met appeared to be getting by, but just barely. They lived a subsistence lifestyle. They struggled to obtain the bare necessities of food and clothing. Simple things like soap and laundry detergent were sometimes hard to find and were very expensive. Things we take for granted -- a soda or a lollipop -- were luxuries most Cubans couldn’t afford. And housing was in short supply, so, many families doubled up with three and four generations living under the same roof.

Given their constant struggle to survive, I kept asking how they did it. How were they able to survive under such circumstances? The answer they gave me was to point to this passage in Second Corinthians, chapter 4, beginning with verse 8:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. . . . we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and bring us with you into his presence.”
It was their faith that gave them the strength to carry on in the face of adversity. It was their faith that enabled them to keep on keeping on. It was their faith that gave them hope in the future.

We would do well to follow the example of our sisters and brothers in the Presbyterian Church in Cuba. We have far fewer hardships than they do and far more resources to draw upon. Surely, our faith -- even faith as small as a mustard seed -- can give us the strength to carry on through this transition and to have hope in the future.

Don’t lose heart! God is with you! You are a healthy and vibrant congregation with the strength and resilience to continue serving God and God’s people in this place. You can do this! You have a future! And for that we give our thanks and praise to God. Alleluia! Amen.