

Southport Presbyterian Church
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**Strong and Steady: Strengthen Those Feeble Hands
and Steady Those Weak Knees**
Hebrews 12:12; Isaiah 35:3-4

Remember that familiar saying from just a few months ago: “Same old, same old.” Do you notice that no one says that anymore? Very little in our lives is staying the same. The economy reels and many wonder about the future of their jobs and businesses. Our new president is bringing in dramatic changes and the Congress is spending enormous amounts of what I can only assume is pretend money. For all of us, “same old, same old” is over. So how do we face times of uncertainty and change?

A few months ago, during a meeting, the leader tossed out an off-handed response to a question and her words went right to the core of me. She said, “Strengthen those feeble hands and steady those weak knees.” I knew it was from scripture and went home to look it up. I have been saying that line to myself ever since and want to talk about it with you today. We are only one month in 2009, and we wonder what the year will bring.

The scripture appears in two places – in both the Old and New Testaments. Here it is from **Hebrews 12:12: Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.**

The writer of Hebrews is quoting from the prophet Isaiah and here’s how it looks in **Isaiah 35: 3-4: Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”**

What this is NOT is a call to self-help. It is a call to courage, but it’s not the call to courage that a self-help book might offer. This is not a call to reach deep inside yourself, find your own personal greatness, and inflate it into strength and courage. If you want that kind of advice, you can buy it at Borders or Barnes and Noble. Rather this is a call to remember where our strength truly does lie. We have the Word of God before us and we read that our authority does not lie in the strength of the human spirit or the power of individuality. Our authority rests in God and God alone.

Our strength lies in God our Father and Creator, in Jesus, His Son, Our Savior, in the Holy Spirit, Our Helper. Our strength lies in God alone. Our strength is not in ourselves, not in a certainty of the power of the individual. Our strength rests in who God is and who we are to God. It’s not the power of me that matters, but the power of God.

So remember. Remember who God is, remember who you are, and remember who holds history in His control. Remember the sovereignty of God because it assures us and gives

us a place to stand. One of our elders recently said to me: “It’s strange, but the more I come to see how small I am, how little power and control I actually have, the braver I feel. Because God has all the power I don’t.”

We look to the authority of Jesus. In **Mark 4** we read: **Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”**

This is a story and it is a statement about the absolute authority of Jesus. And at the very end of Matthew we read this: **Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples.” (Matthew 28:18)** All authority, Jesus said, belonged to him.

We remember what both the Old Testament and New Testament assert – that someday “every knee will bow and every tongue confess” that Jesus Christ is Lord. At that time all will see and acknowledge the authority of Jesus. His is the authority and by that authority we can learn to live with courage and peace.

How do we do this? How do we live with courage in times of uncertainty? Let’s look at some “dress for success” advice that Paul gives us at the very end of **Ephesians, in chapter six.**

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Did you get the wardrobe list?

Truth

Righteousness

Peace

Faith

Salvation

Scripture

Prayer

Here is the list again, reworded a bit:

Seek the truth; Speak the truth
Do what you know is right
Be ready to make peace
Stand firm in what you believe
Claim your salvation
Stand on Scripture
Live in prayer

Let's hear them again, one at a time:

Seek the truth; speak the truth. This requires humility, at least for me. Often I form an opinion and then wonder if I need to re-think, to consider another point of view, to sit quietly and prayerfully for a time, to think more deeply. We humbly seek to know the truth and then we speak it. We are not always in the position of being unsure, of not knowing. There was someone in scripture who said, "Who knows what truth is?" And that was Pontius Pilate, and he is not our role model. There are times when we know the truth and we speak the truth. The truth is a safe place to stand. Often when I talk with people who are troubled by great difficulties, I say: "What is one absolutely true statement you can make?" We talk it over, sit in front of our words, wait to see if there is more, ask if that statement is the full truth. And the truthful statement becomes a small, safe place to stand, a place to begin sorting out the difficulties and complications.

To tell the truth in this way requires humility because you must be open to correction, open to adjusting when you see something new. You must let yourself be challenged. Desire the truth, even if it means you must change your mind. Listen for the truth in circumstances and in the voices of people whose wisdom you recognize. A commitment to live truthfully protects us and gives us freedom.

Do the right thing: Do what you know is right. Righteousness is right behavior and right conduct. Seek to do the right thing, the best you can prayerfully discern it, no matter if others disagree. Seek what is right before God. Often even when we can't see all the outcomes of our decisions, when we aren't sure what decision to make, still we can see some right things to do, some unambiguously right actions to take. Sometimes we stand before actions that we know are "iffy", that are a bit questionable. Those actions we can avoid. Do the right thing.

Be ready to make peace. We are to be quick to make peace, to forgive, to bless, to reconcile, to be open to gestures of peace, to heal relationships, to honor all that is worthy in another. Even in times of difficulty or conflict, we are to be quick to make peace when and where we can.

Stand firm in what you believe. This is our shield; faith is our shield. When evil comes near us, when darkness comes close, that shield of faith – knowing and affirming what we believe, this protects us. Trust in the sovereign God; God will have his way and we do not know God's purposes and plans. They are often invisible, but God is always working,

bringing about the future. Remember God's promises: "No weapon formed against you shall prosper."

Later we will say together the Apostle's Creed...

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

In its original form, it existed in 140 A.D. But even earlier, Paul writes to Timothy (**1 Timothy 6:12**) "**Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.**" We don't know the precise words Timothy spoke in his confession but it undoubtedly contained some of what we will say together: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord..."

Claim your salvation. Salvation is a helmet. It's an identity, a covering. Remember you have been purchased; you have an identity, you belong to God. You are God's own; you have been saved and rescued, claimed and named. On a very bad day, you may choose to remember all day long that you are a beloved child of God. Your salvation defines you. You belong to Jesus; you are His Church. Remember who you are. Remember whose you are. Remember your salvation.

Stand on Scripture. Every other piece of armor is defensive – a belt, a shield, a breastplate, shoes, and a helmet. But the Bible is a sword and it's our only offensive weapon. If we are to fight these battles, our only weapon is the Word of God. It is our authority in what we believe and how we live, in faith and conduct. For us, the Bible is not merely a good resource, a helpful guide to consider, an inspirational tool. It is our authority. The reformer, Martin Luther, who risked his life to preach the Bible, said: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God... Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. My conscience is captive to the Word of God." Do you hear his standing on the Word of God? May God call us to stand as Martin Luther did.

Live in prayer. I talk often to people about prayer. Nearly everyone believes in it and nearly everyone feels guilty about it. "I don't pray enough... I don't pray well... I should do more..." So let's just begin. Often in the morning, my first prayer is, "Lord, help me be a good pastor today." What is you pray, "Lord, give me patience with this person. Help me find a job. Help me not over-react. Give me strength to change another diaper. Help me to love these children that I teach. Help me be a good husband or wife today." Just begin. Pray about the first thing, and then the next thing...

If you have had a reduction in salary, if you have been let go, if your child is in trouble, if your marriage is lonely and difficult, if your own faults of anger or sharp words or despair seem to sink you... Pray. If you are concerned for our church and its future... Pray. Paul tells us to pray for all the saints. We are all saints, of course, but may I suggest a few you may wish to pray for? Pray for our elders, our deacons, our trustees. Pray for those driving the bus, cleaning our buildings, teaching little children.

And now here's the object lesson. As I thought of this scripture, I pictured the way I speak when I am unsure of what to do. Literally, I wave my hands about as I talk. A picture of feeble hands! So then I imagined this – a closed fist – a hand gripped with strength. Yet it's not my strength, not my authority. And so then I imagined this – strong, open hands, waiting to receive, ready to obey and act and work.

Strengthen the feeble hands; steady the weak knees. Our hands must be ready to do works of righteousness, ready to open and search the Scripture, ready to shake a hand offered in peace, ready to hold a shield of faith in front of dark attacks. And our knees should be steady enough to kneel in prayer, steady enough to stand firm where we know we should, steady enough to follow where God leads us.