

“Faith in the Fury”

Today I want to talk about two interwoven realities that will make a difference in your life in mine. Two realities, or traits, that are not a given, but something that we have to work on in order for them to be strong. The traits are faith and perseverance. I’m not smart enough to know how the two are connected, but I know they are. And I know that three weeks out from the tornado, we need to work on both.

What is faith? A good place to start is in the book of Hebrews. Your study guide will have you reading this more fully this week. I’m counting on you to not take my word for it, but to read the book for yourself. You’re going to see some very old references to people of faith and what faith looked like for them. But Hebrews 11 begins this way, **“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1)**. Faith is difficult for some of us. There have been times for me when my faith petered out. Now is not one of those times. But I got a text message from a friend who was being honest. I love that about him. He sent it last Sunday. He wrote, “Ok, I have to ask...today we sang a song about God’s power, how he can move mountains, so why did he allow the tornado to rip Joplin in half and cause such destruction?”

The answer for me is about faith. I don’t know why God didn’t stop the tornado, but my faith in God has been strengthened because of how I believe he was working through the tornado. And my faith is being strengthened in seeing how God is moving mountains as thousands of people who call on his name are literally moving mountains of debris—God is moving mountains through them. And that God is moving mountains of supplies into this area to help families in need. And that God is moving mountains of sadness as people grieve their dead and their losses.

Like my friend, I would like God to explain himself, in this situation, and in so many others. But my faith is at a place right now where I see that my God will not be limited or confined by my desires for an explanation. I’m a why-guy. I want to know why. But one facet of faith is to trust when an explanation isn’t easily available.

I’ve been hesitant to share this with you because I don’t know how you’ll process it. But on the Monday and Tuesday before the tornado we had a staff retreat. I had been so busy and spread so thin that I wasn’t as prepared to lead that retreat as I wanted to be. As I got ready for it I prayed at one point, “God, do what you need to do in this time. I’m to able to plan how this retreat needs to flow, so you do something.” So on that Tuesday before the tornado as we gathered as a staff, I hadn’t planned it, but it just came to mind to ask the staff this question. I asked them, “What we do as a church, if we had to start all over again? What would we do, or do differently, if we had to start from scratch?” So we spent a good chunk of time exploring that, wondering about it, talking it through.

I think what happened in that day, is that in an unplanned moment, the Holy Spirit of God entered in as a way for God to prepare us. Like God was saying, “Something big is about to happen and I need you to be thinking about this right now. I need your minds to go here because I need you to be prepared.”

I was telling this to a group of pastors last Saturday and they all took a step back from me like I was some kind of freak. I’m not a freak! I’m as ordinary as people come. God just found an open door.

Why didn’t the all-powerful God of the universe, the God who can move mountains, why didn’t he stop tornado? I don’t know. But I do know that he prepared the leaders of your church to be, in at least a small way, ready for what happened. My faith informs my understanding even though God chooses not to explain himself. Even though I wish he would have stopped this tornado, or sent it out into the open country, I trust that God was and is actively doing amazing things.

Often we think things have to be perfect, or undamaged, or free from suffering in order to be beautiful, in order to make a difference. But my faith also helps me to see that God uses imperfect things to do beautiful, powerful things.

My brother sent me a story years ago that has stuck with me. It might apply here. It's an old story comes from India. A water carrier in India had two large pots, and these pots hung on each end of a pole that he carried across his neck. One of the pots was perfect; one had a crack in it. The perfect pot always delivered a full pot of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, but the cracked pot always arrived only half full. For a two years this went on daily, with the water carrier delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his master's house. Well, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was only able to accomplish half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it thought was bitter failure, it spoke to the water carrier one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you." "Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?" "For these past two years, I've only been about to deliver half a pot of water because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts."

The water carrier felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and said, "As we go back to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Sure enough, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot noticed all the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its water, and again it apologized for its failure.

The water carrier said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

What's happened in Joplin has created this huge scar through city, and in our minds. But our faith tells that God will do something powerful and even beautiful through what has happened to cause this scarring our city. Not that God caused the tornado, but our faith teaches us to look for the ways that God will use something terrible to do something powerful and beautiful.

Speaking at the memorial service two weeks ago was a tragic honor. When they asked me to do it I actually gave them the names of two other pastors I thought would do a much better job than me-- I've never felt confident in my abilities to speak. And I didn't know it was going to be televised nationally. But the outpouring from that day has been mind-boggling. I've gotten notes, and letters, and cards from all over the country. That something that day spoke to people.

There's one letter in particular that I want to share with you. This is from Martha Paas in Northfield, MN. "Dear Rev. Brown, I heard your message on the televised Memorial Service yesterday. I found a summary of the speech today on the web and as I read it I found myself wanting to write to you.

"I grew up in the Methodist church in Alabama, but my faith has lapsed over the years and I cannot say that I believe in God or in heaven. But something in your address stirred my heart, and whether we call it God, or some deep will within the human psyche that we call on in times of trouble, I felt that. Thank you for expressing the belief that "death does not win", something I firmly believe, for that is ultimately what rescues us from despair.

"Your general demeanor, voice, message that moved nonbelievers like me was so welcome, especially in these years when 'preachers' mouth slogans and call it religion.

"Best wishes, and thank you, Martha Paas"

"P.S. I am enclosing a small contribution toward the rebuilding of your church."

Nonbelievers, helping to rebuild our church! Is that amazing or what? I don't know why God didn't stop the tornado, but my faith is allowing me to see how God can use something terrible like this, and use a very ordinary like us, to move even mountains of unbelief. God is using imperfect situations,

and imperfect people to do something powerful and beautiful. But it takes faith to see it, especially if you've lost your home, more especially if you've lost a family member or friend.

One side note about faith that I have to talk about is that faith doesn't mean that you gut it out by yourself and paint a fake face over your pain. I've seen that happen before. Someone goes through something tragic and feels some sort of false Christian pressure to pretend like everything is ok, to pretend like there is no pain, to pretend like having faith means you always have to smile and be happy. To put it biblically, that's a load of...um, that's not biblically accurate.

Faith lived out cries out in pain when it hurts. Faith lived out expresses its exhaustion. Faith lived out doesn't feel like it has to paint on a fake face. What this means practically is that if you need help let us help. I'm talking specifically about counseling. We have a group of trained counselors that are ready to help. Please use them. There is no need to gut this out alone if you are struggling with grief, or loss, or images that you can't get out of your mind. You may think you're being strong by trying to go it alone, but that's not strength, that pride, and it will bite you. Let us and our counselors help.

Listen faith is something that we have to be intentional about developing, and growing and nurturing—it takes effort. But listen, the effort is worth it. It's worth it in many ways, but there's one way in particular I want to talk about and that's perseverance.

We as a community, as a church, are not going to be defined by this tornado. We are going to be defined by how we shape our future. I say that and I believe that, but I also have to acknowledge that we have a long road ahead of us. That is where perseverance is crucial. The Apostle Paul wrote, **"...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us"** (Romans 5:3-5).

The apostle James put it this way, **"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything"** (James 1:2-4).

Rejoice in suffering? Really? Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds. Seriously? Can I admit to you that I'm not there yet? But I know how important perseverance is and will be. Paul is saying that without perseverance, we have no hope. If we give up, or give in we are leaving hope behind and people without hope have nothing.

James is saying that half-way is not enough. As we rebuild our homes, and our churches and our businesses and our lives, we can't settle for halfway done. The perseverance that brings hope, that brings joy, can't stop halfway or settle for half done. This means we rebuild our city, we rebuild our neighborhoods, that we get the word out to the rest of the world that they can help us get on the way to rebuilding or they better get out of the way as we rebuild. People who are negative, who are pessimistic, better get a change of heart and get on the way with us, or get out of the way. Because we have faith that can move mountains, and that faith fuels our perseverance and we will rebuild.

We simply must persevere, and endure, and be prepared for the long haul. But listen, that doesn't mean that we're going to get it right all the time. I took part in 4 funerals last week—Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. On Tuesday evening I lost it. I popped and it was not pretty. A combination of grief, and anger, and worry, and my little mind blowing those worries out of proportion. I'm in this for the long haul, but on Tuesday night last week I lost it. And I wanted to give up, and I had my little pity party. But Wednesday morning, I was ready to go again. Listen, cut yourself some slack if you have your days when you just pop, when you give up. Get it out of your system, and then get back at it.

Now, in order to have faith and perseverance for the long haul, it comes back to our mission. If you want to be able to thrive in the rebuilding, then live out our mission. Love God, Love others, Serve the world. If you want to grow your faith and perseverance, don't you dare miss these times of worship unless you're sick or of town. Don't dare get lazy about being in God's word and in prayer.

If you want to grow in faith and perseverance in good times and bad, love others, find that small group of people, that little community where you are doing life together. Those people who lost their homes and were connected in a small group, you talk about support, love, food, clothes, housing, money. If you wonder why we want you to be in a small group it's for times like this. Call us, we'll get you connected. Start a group on your own.

And if you want a growing sense of faith and perseverance then serve the world. Just do it. Don't hide away, serve. Faith and perseverance.

Sometimes an image of perseverance on an individual level can inspire us on a much larger scale. This story has been inspiring me for several months now. This is Cody's story. **[VIDEO: Cody's story available at ignitermedia.com].**

How's that for an image of perseverance, when you get weary, exhausted, down and sad. "...Because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us..."

The world is watching us down here in this little corner of the world. Let's show them what faith, what perseverance, really look like. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Life Wins. Amen.