

Day 1

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

“I will speak of your goodness, all day long I will speak of your salvation.” -Psalm 71:1

I have been publicly preaching and teaching the Word for almost twenty years. Speaking the Gospel is my profession, my calling, my daily life. But one day I woke up with no voice. I had been intubated. I was on a ventilator. I had undergone a tracheostomy. I was connected to a life support machine known as ECMO. While the world moved on, I was still in a hospital bed for over six weeks fighting for my life. I was mostly sedated and unconscious through most of my battle with Covid pneumonia.

When I finally “came to” and was semi-alert, the first thing I realized was that my voice was gone. I couldn’t really talk. I also couldn’t move a muscle. Literally. I could not roll over in bed and I could barely lift up my arms. I’ve had to learn how to do everything all over again. Stand up. Sit down. Brush my teeth. Use a spoon. Write. Type. Climb the stairs. There was a hole in my heart.

But what bothered me the most was that there was a hole in my throat, from the tracheostomy. Daily I was reminded of this new reality when it was cleaned and bandaged - no matter how hard I tried to forget. Even when I finally went home my superhuman wife Jaki continued to care for the wound. Talk about being married for “better or worse.”

In time, no voice has turned into a whisper, and with more time the whisper has turned into a hoarse voice. As of this writing, I am still more or less at that point. The medical folks say in time my voice will hopefully come back. But in those dark moments of the night, literally and figuratively, when I’m all alone, I wonder if it will ever truly come back.

So while I was still in bed, this familiar verse always came to mind: “Be still and know that I am God.”

I have had a lot of time to be still and think during my hospitalization and convalescence. I couldn’t do much else and I’m still limited. Being left with your thoughts can be a tortuous time, I can assure you of this fact! But it can also be a blessing, I can equally assure you of this fact. In the end, I want to reassure you that it was more of a blessing than a curse. I also want to remind you of what you already know from the Word. The goodness of God even in bad times! The goodness of God even in ICU.

If anyone ever told you while you were in ICU to “rest up,” they have never been in ICU. Every hour it seems someone comes into the room poking you and prodding you. Taking medicines, taking x-rays, taking vitals.

So, during the night I was often awake left to wrestle with God like Jacob. I never got angry with God. I never asked, “Why me?” But I wrestled with God over many things. One was my voice. Or lack thereof.

But back to the time left alone with God to think. One question was my voice in general, but more specifically what made a pastor's voice unique? What makes the pastor's voice different from other voices?

Here is the answer. "The only thing a pastor has to say is what God has to say." This quote is from Dr. Steven Lawson, Teaching Fellow for Ligonier Ministries.

Point? The Word of God is different in a unique way. It's the reason why the pastor preaches in a pulpit, wears an alb, and dresses in a clerical collar. Signifying that this Word proclaimed is no mere word of man, but He speaks the Word of God.

The bottom line between human language and a divine message? You and I can only describe things with our words. God's word actually makes things. It has power. I can tell you not to worry. But in the end, that doesn't mean much. When Jesus says, "Cast all your cares on me for I care for you," He actually makes that happen.

Recall the Creation story! When God spoke His Word He did not just describe light but created light. When God spoke He didn't just report about the water below and the sky above, He placed the fish and stars in their ordained place and space. When God spoke it wasn't just a chronicle of the earth, He filled the world with a creation fearfully and wonderfully made - including you.

God's Word does what it says. It transforms us and makes us saints from sinners. It renews, restores, and reconciles. It resurrects! On the last day, Jesus will stand over your grave and speak a word of Life. You and all those in Christ will be made new again!

This is what makes the Word of God so special. It creates! Life from death. It makes certain defeat, undeniable triumph. It makes our lowly bodies to be like His resurrected body.

In my toughest hours of uncertainty this was my hope. God can make all things new! His living Word I have preached with a loud voice for almost two decades, but only when I was silenced in ICU did I really begin to understand this promise of how the Word actually works and what makes this Word so special. Speaking on our own we can only describe, when God speaks He can create beauty.

I found it ironic one day when I was in the hospital, that while I looked at myself in the mirror, that the hole from the trach - now scar - is in the exact same place where the white tab of the clerical collar rests on my neck.

It was never my frail voice. It is never your feckless voice. It was and is and will always be the voice of the Living God who created and makes new again. This is what we proclaim as witnesses. New beginnings. Either new beginnings for a gracious season here in this life for a few more fleeting moments, or the eternal beginning for life everlasting.

When you look in the mirror at yourself at home and look at the pastor preaching the Word in your church home - remember something special is happening - God is alive and active and making you a new creation!

+To God be the glory.

Day 2
Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You
"Vanity of vanities." - Ecclesiastes 1:2

Self-discovery.

There are moments in life where we learn a lot about ourselves.

Going off to college. Getting married. Having kids. Retirement.

ICU?

In ICU I discovered something about myself. I'm not exactly proud to admit it publicly. But I'm a vain person. Are you?

You see, in ICU I started to lose my hair. Reason? Stress, poor nutrition, medications. Side effect of Covid. Maybe all the above. Maybe none of the above. Who knows? All I know is my hair is thinning out. I also know I'm not very happy about it.

Maybe when I should be thanking God I'm alive, I catch myself cursing God that my hair is falling out. Maybe I should be focused on the health of my heart and lungs. This seems rational after being on life support!

But sinful attitudes never appeal to reason. Sin is by definition the opposite of godly reason. So, I find myself fretting over the hairs on my head. It all reminds me of the phrase from an old song, "You're so vain."

The problem with vanity is that you not only sound and look like a fool, but you lose sight of priority and perspective.

In vanity we naval gaze at ourselves with blinders on to the point where we can't see anything or anyone else, including Jesus. We worry about the things we shouldn't be worried about and we overlook the things we should be setting our hearts and minds on...like the cross and the heavenly things above.

The next time you find yourself caught in the tangled web of vanity, remember, there is One who already "knows the number of hairs on your head." He knows you. He cares for you. He forgives you.

He loves without condition. He loves even the vain.

That is a Divine discovery!

+To God be the glory!

Day 3

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." -Matthew 19:26

Five retired pastors have been a member of our church family over the last decade. One of the retired pastors has a "habit" of leaving me notes of encouragement. It's weird. Weird in a good way. Every time the note shows up it is exactly what I needed to hear at that moment.

Recently, this retired pastor, who I admire greatly, left a note updating me on his health and encouraging me during my health challenges.

One part of the note stood out and jumped off the page. "Jesus never promised it would be easy, but that all things are possible."

Stop. Re-read that line...again...and again.

"Not easy, but possible."

Yes, in Christ all things are possible. The Lord is in the business of making the impossible possible. Scripture testifies to it.

God's presence in life looks to be impossible to mere human eyesight. The eyesight of faith sees something different.

The Lord will walk you through the impossible valley of the shadow of death to the green pastures of life everlasting.

The Lord will forgive sins that others in your life find impossible to forgive.

The Lord will hear your prayer and give an improbable answer. As the former Lutheran Hour Speaker was fond of saying, "The Lord does not answer with a 'yes' or 'no.' He answers with a 'good' or 'better.'" What does this mean? Well, for example, in days of ill health the Lord answers His children with the answer of 'good' or 'better,' perhaps in this way - the good blessing of earthly healing or He answers with the better blessing of eternal healing.

We can trust God's will. Not by our power. That's impossible. The trials and tribulations of this world are simply too great. But by His Spirit He makes the impossible possible. He gifts us not only with salvation but also with a faith and trust in His plan of salvation no matter what comes our way. Resting in His will and not wrestling with His will is our calling. And this is possible because no matter the outcome of our struggle we are more than conquerors! Does it mean this will be easy? No.

Perfect peace is ours but not fully experienced until we enter heaven.

The point of this verse in Matthew 19:26 is not a quick fix miracle cure from the troubles of this life. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble." Too often Christianity is hijacked by the health, wealth and prosperity false preachers. Believe me, the prosperity gospel does not work when you are in ICU. The point of this verse is to point us to the cross, the ultimate miracle cure. Mt. Calvary is the place where the impossible became possible. It is the place where we see poor, miserable sinners, who have no possibility to save themselves are now given grace upon grace. Jesus continued to say, "take heart, you have overcome the world." How? Where? When? Easter. Easter is the day when the impossible became possible.

And you are an Easter people!

Until that day of the great resurrection and reunion there will be easy and hard days. Even in the difficult days we journey with Jesus. He will bring healing of body and soul either here in time or for eternity. You are always in a win-win situation as a Christian. Never forget this promise. It is hard to hold on to this promise. Trust me. I know from my own experience in ICU. But God will hold on to you! And in the end, that is all that matters!

After all, He is the Great Physician.

+To God be the glory.

Day 4

Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You

"Man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps." - Proverbs 16:9

I didn't see the sun for way over a month. The bright spot in my room was hanging on the wall. Jaki and the kids made two poster boards filled with family pictures. It was something that put a smile on my face.

It was also something that created internal consternation. What if I didn't make it and the Lord called me home? What would happen to the kids? Had I made enough plans to ensure the kids were taken care of if my health failed?

We are called to "make plans." We are also comforted in knowing God directs our way. Earthly parents do not parent alone. A husband and wife also have a heavenly parent, Our Father, working with them and for their children.

To cut to the chase...our children are really God's children. Ultimately, they are not ours but His. On loan to us, you might say, as caretakers of a gift. As the psalm writer says, they are a "gift to parents." We usually think of Stewardship in the Lutheran church in the framework of Time, Talents, and Treasures. But it also helps us and comforts us when it comes to parenting. We are not owners of our children but called by God to be caretakers of His sons and daughters. We make plans for our kids, as we should, but God will direct their way using those plans or, at times, despite those plans.

Your child is a child of God. He never forsakes them or leaves them. He does not leave them as orphans. He provides. And He provides in ways we might never even imagine in the future. This promise is especially a comfort to parents who have a child who has wandered from the faith. Earthly parents maybe feel like they have exhausted every avenue in bringing them back home to the church. As a pastor, I've sat in my office or had a conversation in the narthex with a fair share of parents who feel hopeless over a wayward child.

Yes, it might be true that you are at an impasse. But there is one more parent - a Heavenly Father - and His Holy Spirit never takes a vacation. He is always chasing the prodigal child. He never gives up. He is always at work. There is always hope!

Mom and dad...take heart, you're not in this parenting role all alone.

Make your plans and watch the Lord direct their steps.

+To God be the glory!

Day 5
Pastoral Letters: From ICU to You.
"Love your neighbor" -Matthew 5:43

Every morning the nurses or physical therapist asked me what day it was? What month? Numerical day? Day of the week?

As they would pick up the dry erase marker and write the day on the white board hanging on the wall, I gave it a whirl. I gave it a good guess. The old college try. You might be proud of your pastor. I had a perfect record. 100%. I never got it right one time. I missed every time. Why? A good answer for why I never knew what day it was might be for starters because I was on or just got off high powered medications. Paralytic drugs.

A better answer? Everyday seemed the same. In ICU there is no difference between Easter Day and Christmas Day. Halloween and Valentine's Day are all the same. Everyday "looks" and "feels" the same. There is no sense of time. Day is night and night is day.

In fact, they played a mean trick on me, joking here, sort of. My room had a clock that went by military time. I called Jaki a few times during the middle of the night thinking it was the middle of the day, because the whole military time just wasn't computing in my mind.

Time, days, weeks, months...life does go on for the healthy, while life stops for the sick.

If you have ever been seriously injured, severely ill, or hospitalized for an extended amount of time you know what I'm talking about.

The frustration! So much frustration.

The frustration of not being able to do all the things you normally do - or used to do. The frustration of not being active. The frustration of not being productive. The frustration of just sitting around. Did I mention the frustration?

If you are down for the count, life still goes on around you. While you look at social media...friends and family are at birthday parties and BBQ's and the beach, weddings and baby showers, confirmations and graduation. Cool vacations.

Those who struggle with ill health feel more than physical pain. There is the pain of isolation. The separation from community.

When Jesus performed miracles this is often an overlooked part of His work. Yes, the miracle of physical healing was a huge blessing, but the healing often brought the individual another big blessing. It brought them back into the community. For example, the physical healing Jesus often brought on the pages of the Gospels freed people from being ostracized because their ailment rendered them ceremonially unclean.

God does not call us to solve the world's problems. The world is His. But He has given us a world where the neighbor is now ours. He does call us to love our neighbor.

"Adopt" one person in your life who is often ostracized from community and specifically your church family. Drop by and visit. Share your favorite recipe, watch the football game with them or look at family pictures with them, listen to their stories, pick up and drop off a devotional from church, pray with them, or if possible, give them a ride to church.

A shut-in who has gone on to heaven once told me, "I'd rather suffer in good company, than be healthy and all alone."

When you recite the creed this Sunday, "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints," remember those isolated and remember to love your neighbor.

+To God be the glory!