

Holding Fast

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Grab a seat, everyone. My name is Ben Roberts. I'm a priest here at St. John's. I lead a ministry training program called Artidzo, and sometimes you'll also see me up here.

It's a privilege to be here preaching on the second Sunday of Advent as we unpack the colics together. That's our series is looking at the colics one by one through Advent, and then from those colics, digging into the scripture that those colics are built upon, the foundations of them.

So if you would turn, flip your bulletin over and look on page 10 of your bulletin, that's the colic at the very top that we'll look at today. And the aim of that is that we would embrace and hold fast to the hope of everlasting life.

So hope is what this colic is about. I know it's supposed to be peace on the second week of Advent, but here we are, and the colic is about hope. And this hope is not a vain wish.

It's not the way Vancouverites hope that the sun will come out in December. Rather, it's certain trust. It's trust that God has drawn near to us in Christ, and he is making all things new under his perfect rule.

[1 : 24] And it is a hope that's strong enough to actually shape our life and our loves and the decisions and the actions that we make now. And that's what this prayer is about, a prayer that we would be gripped and transformed and impelled by King Jesus, what he is doing, and that he's coming again. And that now, where we find ourselves waiting, we would long for that, and we would lean into the hope of heaven that is promised to us.

And so in that sense, this colic is a prayer for the end. But it's also a prayer for the means. Because we might ask, how? How do we do that?

How do we grip onto that hope here and now? And the answer is, by God's word, the scripture. Holding fast to hope is holding fast to God's word.

In a world of doublespeak and vitriol, sometimes we say that words are cheap, and we know that too often words destroy, including our own words. But words create as well.

And I know this because I wrote each of my kids a post-it note before I went away to synod. A very small little note, you know, just the standard stuff. I'll miss you. I love you. Don't bite each other.

[2 : 40] Don't burn the house down. Love, Dad. So that seemed like a pretty small thing to me. But they each slept with their post-it note every single night that I was gone.

Because words are the currency of relationship. A God who speaks is a God that we can know and a God that we can hope in.

And that's what our passage is about in 2 Timothy. Maybe you should turn there. 2 Timothy, I think it's at page 996. 2 Timothy 3, verse 14.

2 Timothy reminds us that God has spoken. And that his written speech transforms us. And that we are utterly reliant on it. We're reliant on the word from heaven for embracing the hope of heaven.

So as we go through this, first we'll look at how Timothy is entrusted with God's word. He's entrusted with it in the face of false and destructive words.

[3 : 40] And then second, we'll see that he's entrusted with it because it's the word of God breathed out. It's God's very word. And third, we'll see that it's useful for strengthening our grip on hope.

And then we'll look and see again at the collect. And we'll see if it can tie all these things together for us. Does it sound okay? Right. So first, hold fast to the word entrusted to you.

Timothy is to guard and continue in the gospel. So if you look at verse 14. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.

So the passage today begins with a contrast to what has come before. Saying, but as for you, Timothy, continue in this way. Not that way. This way. This way. And it's a contrast between God's true word, his gospel, and false words or false gospels.

And the context is what helps us to see that. The context is that Paul, this experienced pastor and apostle, is writing to Timothy, his spiritual son, his protege.

[4 : 45] And Timothy is a young pastor who is in way over his head. As most pastors feel most of the time. Why do pastors feel that way?

It's because pastoral ministry is not this kind of sentimental social service. We just, you know, sometimes we imagine it as like, you know, a bureaucrat is just kind of, you know, on the helm of a slowly sinking ship going down into the ocean, just kind of muttering nice things.

And that's not what being a pastor is about. The image from last week is spiritual warfare. Paul is in prison. He's writing this letter from prison.

He's in prison for preaching the gospel. He is suffering. He's been persecuted. He's also been abandoned and betrayed by people he thought were friends and co-workers.

There's a war on. God's gospel is at the center of that war. Paul has entrusted this gospel to Timothy to entrust to others. Meaning that Timothy is to carry on this work faithfully through great difficulty and suffering.

[5 : 51] Paul says, Timothy, continue. Hold fast to what you've been taught, to what you believe. Hold fast to God's gospel. Because you know who you learned it from. You learned it from me. I'm putting my money where my mouth is.

I'm suffering for the gospel. So, the gospel has been entrusted to Timothy like a precious treasure. And it's been entrusted because it's so easily mishandled and abused and forgotten and ignored.

And those are all the things that Timothy's congregation is currently doing. And they're contending with false teachers that are preaching false gospels. And so, it's helpful to look at this false teaching a little bit.

Paul describes these teachers in this way. He says, they're always quarreling about words. They're spouting irreverent babble. They've swerved from the truth by saying, the resurrection has already happened.

You missed it. And this is all about distraction and incoherence and doctrinal innovation or the shifting of the firm foundation of the gospel.

[6 : 53] But what's really interesting is the result of what happens from that false teaching. So, we may think that false teaching is not that harmful.

Maybe it's neutral. But Paul reveals it to be incredibly destructive. He says, this teaching is spreading among the congregation like gangrene. That the teachers are ensnared by the devil.

That they're always learning but never able to understand the truth. Their minds are corrupted. They go on deceiving and being deceived. Their faith is a shipwreck. And so, all of this language is about captivity and futility and hopelessness.

And we also see that the result of it is a set of horrifying actions and personal qualities. So, if you look at the top of chapter 3, this is a horrifying list.

Lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

[8 : 06] He starts that list and you think that he's talking about just kind of the general state of the world. And he is. But by the end of it, you come to see that he's actually talking about the false teachers. This is the outcome of false teaching is a life like this.

Martin Luther describes human nature in sin as incurvatus in se. That's great. You have to say it after me. Incurvatus in se. Incurvatus in se.

Pretty good. That's your Latin for the day. So it means to be turned in on yourself, curved in on yourself. And so this is a picture of sin. In sin, I'm fixated on my own needs and feelings.

My goal is my self-rule. My priority is my desires. And I'm blind to the truth. I'm unable to escape. Captive, futile, hopeless.

And yet in that state, deceived about the fact that I'm in it. Right? I don't even know that I'm trapped. And this is the end of false teaching is to become curved in on yourself. It always trades God's truth for whatever my truth is.

[9 : 09] And this is very relevant to us. The false teaching of our age, which is present within the church and without, is that the cure to my ills, to whatever the problem that confronts me, is to listen to my heart and to live my truth.

And the promise of salvation in that framework of belief is that I'm saved through self-authenticity. It's the plot of every Disney movie.

You can watch and see. It's always the plot. But think about that for a minute. The prescription of that philosophy is literally turn in on yourself harder. If you're unhappy, turn in on yourself more.

It's never going to work. Only the gospel has broken this captivity, this self-obsession. And it's the good news that God has reached into your life through his son to liberate and illuminate and give you certain hope.

And it's a hope that's outside yourself. It's a hope that's in Christ and what he's doing. So, Timothy, continue in what you've been taught. The gospel, which is the thesis of the Bible, which is God's love letter to humanity, which is his powerful inspired word.

[10 : 19] Hold fast to this word because it is God-breathed. So, let's look at verse 15 and 16. How from childhood you've been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

All scripture is breathed out by God. All scripture. For Timothy, this is the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament. That's something that's challenging for us to hear, isn't it?

That by looking and meditating at the Old Testament, we can become wise for salvation. But we find out later in 2 Peter that actually the whole apostolic witness is in this category as well.

What becomes the New Testament is scripture as well. It's all breathed out by God. And the word for breath there, you probably know. Breath and spirit. Pneuma. The same word in Greek.

It's a beautiful double image. It's God speaking. So, these are the words of God. And they rush forth out of God in the power of his Holy Spirit and are made real and vital within our hearts.

[11 : 23] Our colleague says that God caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning. That's important, isn't it? God is the operative force at work here. And so, you can imagine all of these thousands of years, prophets and priests and fishermen and former Pharisees.

And they're setting pen to paper and they're writing. And these are God's words written by humans for humans in this miraculous double authorship. And these words are powerful in a way that no other words are.

When God spoke into creation, all things came into being. And when he speaks in Scripture, new creation is made in our heart. We're made wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Through Scripture, something is revealed, right? It's something that is not discovered by our own wisdom. It's not something we figure out. Scripture reveals what God is doing.

And John Calvin likens it to spectacles. Do you have spectacles? I just went to the eye doctor and they said, You need spectacles. They said glasses.

[12 : 30] So, I had hoped they would come before I would preach. But I can't see you. I can hear you. I trust that there's someone out there. But that's the metaphor, right?

With bad eyesight, you can't even distinguish letters on a page. And Calvin says, When you put the spectacles of Scripture on, everything that was smudgy suddenly becomes clear.

Jesus is made known to us. We can see his shape and his edges, and we can understand who he is. But in addition to revealing God, Scripture actually goes further than just revealing.

It's actually able to bring us to salvation. It's able to make us wise. And so, the Bible doesn't just tell us how to be saved through faith in Jesus Christ.

It also accomplishes that job. It takes us from knowing about Jesus to trusting and loving and being in relationship with Jesus. And so, the Bible is not a collection of dead words on a page.

[13 : 29] It's a document that is empowered by God's Spirit. God's Spirit didn't just help write it. God's Spirit is in it now and is working in our hearts through this word. It's living and active.

It's a book that will bite you back. It's not a mistake that the word wisdom is used here. Wisdom is vital. It's living knowledge.

It's applied understanding. And it finds its purpose when Jesus is revealed in our hearts. When we put our trust in him. And it's because the Bible is God-breathed and Spirit-empowered that we can come to his word expectantly.

He speaks by it now. We should expect him to speak in it when we study it and listen to it. And that's the third thing. That we hold fast to the word because it is useful.

So, going on in verse 16. So, when Paul, in this very important moment in the history of the church, instructs Timothy on how to hold fast.

[14 : 44] On how to protect and pass on the gospel. He says, use scripture. That's a helpful reminder for us. We're easily captivated by other things.

And we supplement or substitute God's words for other things that seem appealing. We think the well has surely gone dry on that old thing by now. And so, we pick up tradition or fads or business models or smoke and lights.

And those things become the work of the church. But time after time and generation after generation, God's word is the work. And God's word does the work. And that's what he's talking about here by using these words.

He says it is profitable. It's useful for teaching. The word of God must be our teacher. And this is why we're committed to Bible study and expositional preaching here.

Do you remember Jim Saladin? Jim Saladin once said to me, if you cut St. John's, it bleeds Bible study. And I was like, that's true. It does.

[15 : 50] But this is the reason we're committed to it. Sermons are not life advice. They're not stand-up routines. Right? What are we doing? We're opening. We're holding up the word of God and asking that it might teach us.

We're together. We're coming under that word. And we're asking Christ to rule in our hearts through it. It's also for reproof. Reproof is a very strong and confrontational word.

And so, this is, in Timothy's context, this is about confronting false teaching. And I don't think it's, it's not about going out and trying to find everything that's wrong and correcting it.

It's the clear, patient, and humble speaking of the truth. It's clearly saying, no, I'm sorry, that's, it's not that. This is what the word of God teaches. This is, we're holding fast to that.

What you're saying is not correct. Right? That's reproof. It's also for correction. And this is a, this is another great word. It's a word that is used to make something that is bent straight again.

[16 : 50] And so, it's like a physician might set a bone and correct it, make it straight. Or maybe your fence has kind of gone wonky and you want to make it on the plumb line again. In the context of this sermon, I'm wanting to think of it as someone that is curved in on themselves, looking at themselves, being made straight again, being able to stand upright and see clearly.

Often when we talk about application in a sermon, we're, we're talking about correction a lot of the time. We're saying, maybe your eyes are over there, over there, there, you're looking at that, or you're loving that, and you need to focus your eyes back on Jesus.

That's a call to correction. Come back into line. And finally, is this training in righteousness. And the word training here is a word that is used to nurture and educate children.

And it's saying to us, this word, the word of God, the Bible, it's a sound pedagogy. It's a full curriculum. It's a tested method. Everything you need to grow up in right living and right loving, you can find here.

And the result of all of these things, using the word of God in all of these ways, is that the man of God may be complete and equipped for every good work. So the pastor that clings to the word and uses the word is going to be able to hold fast, and is going to be finished and ready for the work of guarding the gospel.

[18 : 13] They're equipped to do everything that is set before them. They have every tool in the toolbox for ministry. And imagine my delight. You guys are not going to believe this. The word for equipped is the word artidzo.

Can you believe that? I know. We didn't even plan it. This is what we do in artidzo.

We say to the apprentices, cling to the word. Deploy it day in and day out in every situation. And if you do that, you'll be ready for the work of ministry, and you'll carry it on faithfully.

Okay. Entrusted, God-breathed, and useful to us. But what does our colleagues say about it? Let's look again at that. What is it that we're praying for here on page 10?

We're asking God for help in hearing, reading, marking, knowing, or learning, and inwardly digesting. So notice in this collect how God's word starts out here, and then it ends up here in my belly.

[19 : 29] God, help us to hear and read your word, yes. But not only that, because hearing and reading can stay out there. And we don't want it just to stay out there. Next, that I might mark it.

Not mark it with a pen, like in a Bible study. We might do that, but this is not what mark means here. It means take heed of it. Sit up and pay attention to it.

That's the next step. And then finally, that I might learn it. And that's now, all of a sudden, it's becoming internal, right? It's coming into me. That I might memorize it and come to more deeply understand it, to be taught by it.

And then finally, inwardly digest it. This is interesting. Knowledge is not the highest good here. Often we get stuck at the level of learning.

That's a safe level. We're a smart bunch. It's easy to stay there. But the prayer actually goes through learning into the very depths of us. It ends with the word being digested within us.

[20 : 31] There's potentially a lot of pride in knowledge or in learnedness. But I've never met anybody that brags about their digestion.

And it's the earthiness of this language that makes it very helpful to us. Food is nourishment. It's literal sustenance. We eat it and then it becomes a part of us.

It's actually built into our body. We're dependent upon the food to give us the nutrients. We don't master it. It's not a thing that we own or control. And if you've ever fasted, then you know that hunger makes you long for food, right?

You see food and you start to salivate. Or you can like smell someone's cooking something somewhere. And if you fast for long enough, your body actually enters a state called autophagy.

And literally that word means that your body is eating itself. That's an interesting image, isn't it? The starving soul is in cravatus and say it's self-facing, it's self-consuming.

[21 : 37] But when it is nourished and filled and strengthened and built up by God's word, it's fed with the food that we were made for. Man does not live by bread alone, but every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

And so through this meal on God's word, the next thing that the callic prays for is that through this coming outside, inside into the deepest place of our hearts, we would be given patience and comfort.

And these again are the old English senses of these words. So patience is about diligent perseverance. Right? And so we need that sometimes when we come to the Bible.

I'm not saying that it's always easy to understand. Right? And a lot of times we are baffled by the things that God has spoken to us. And yet as we inwardly digest it, ruminate on it, in this diligent perseverance that comes to be a part of us and shape us.

And the second thing is comfort or strengthening in order that we might reach out and grasp onto this hope, the hope of everlasting life, the hope of Jesus coming again.

[22 : 48] Words are powerful, especially God's word. So let's feast on it this Advent. Come to the word in expectancy because the breath of God rushes through it.

Humble yourself beneath it because it will teach, reprove, correct, and train us as we become wise for salvation through faith in our Lord Jesus, our certain King and our certain hope.

Let's pray this call once more as we close on page 10. Amen. Amen.

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of your everlasting life, which you have given your Savior, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

Amen.