

Sunday, June 17, 2018 – 4th Sunday after Pentecost
“Grace to Look Beyond”

2 Corinthians 5: 1-17

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Central Image – Single Focus

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

We continue in this series on 2 Corinthians looking at God’s gift of grace, which last week we saw as an undeserved, unexpected gift – the change in life that brings about fear and loss is the very thing that leads us to recognition of our need to repent, our need for what Jesus offers, our need for the gift of God that we don’t deserve.

And this consideration brings us to another idea about grace that we ended on last week – God gives us grace to look beyond what we see in our lives. When what we see is pain, loss, fear and change, even our decaying bodies and world that Paul talks about in our text, waiting to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling – a new body, a new creation, then we can look beyond. We live by faith, not by sight.

This past week news came out that Amazon struck a deal to air a Lord of the Rings streaming TV series for the low low price of one billion dollars. The Lord of the Rings has been a cultural phenomenon both in the original mid-20th century books and in the epic blockbuster movie trilogy almost two decades ago, if you can believe that. What you may not know is that the author, J.R.R. Tolkien was a deeply devout Christian and close friend and contemporary of vaunted Christian author C.S. Lewis – they reviewed each other’s rough drafts of their writing while smoking pipes together at their favorite pub in their native Britain. Deep themes of Christian hope, informed by Tolkien’s faith in Christ and the context of his writing during and right after the horrors of World War II are all over the place in the Lord of the Rings. I’ll be a typical American and quote from the movie rather than from the book... there’s a point where two friends Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee are captured and are at a low point, facing so much turmoil and evil as war, ugliness and betrayal reign supreme all around them. The hero of the story, Frodo, wants to give up. We’ve all been there at one point or another, haven’t we? It’s all just too much to bear – and his friend Sam comes in with this beautiful encouragement: “I know. It’s all wrong. By rights we shouldn’t even be here. But we are. It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were. And

sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going. Because they were holding onto something.

We live by faith, not by sight. Sight shows you illness, weakness, death. Faith shows you Jesus' promise to heal, to bind up the broken hearted and wounded, to resurrect you. Sight shows your mistakes, your failures, your insecurities, your sin, plain to God as it is to our consciences. Faith shows you Jesus' perfection shared with you, Jesus' forgiveness, Jesus reconciling you with His Father. Sight shows you the darkness and danger which are a passing thing. Faith shows you a new creation that makes you part of a great story with plenty of chances to turn back and lose hope but the strength of Jesus keeps us going as in faith, we hold onto hope that does not disappoint us.

The word grace never explicitly shows up in our text today, the only of these five Sundays in this series where that is true, but friends this is all grace – and today we celebrate the grace to look beyond what we see plain as day to God and our consciences and through faith we can “see” something else – in Jesus Christ, you are a new creation. Forget what your body says, or your budget says, or your dreams that didn't come true say – they don't hold court forever. They don't get the last word. They are temporary, passing shadows – and though it's what we deserve, in Jesus we get the unexpected, undeserved gift of grace to look beyond what is plainly visible for us to see and see something better.

And as wonderful as the encouragement of that grace is for us in our own standing before God and our own hope, God then uses us, like Sam to his friend Frodo to share that encouragement with each other. Let's be honest, most of us don't spend most of our lives feeling as low as Frodo, wanting to give up all hope. You may never, even in your worst moments, have felt a total lack of resilience... yet. The truth is that most people, at one time or another, will reach deep pits of fear and lack of hope as the temporary, passing shadows come

in our direction. And then we get to support each other. Sometimes you'll be Frodo, losing hope – I promise you that God will provide a Sam to keep pointing you back to the light, back to the greater story, the reality of what God is doing beyond what we see plainly before our eyes.

I'm not talking about, "Don't worry, be happy." I'm not talking about, "Well, look at the bright side." I'm not saying, "Calm down." I'm saying whatever "It" is that there is a grace beyond what's plainly visible before you – not only for a beautiful end to the story when Jesus returns and you have that new body in the new heavens and the new earth but there's a beautiful grace now through Jesus' ministry of reconciliation. You are a new creation – God says so in your baptism. You are a new creation – God proves it in forgiving your sins, right before your eyes today at this table. We turn toward each other not with a worldly point of view but with that powerful, mysterious encouragement that comes when God works through us to bless each other. And then imagine the witness, the hope, the power of sharing that same reason for hope to other people you know who are sick of the ugliness and darkness and like Frodo they want to give up – for you to sit in the squalor with them in the very same conditions to all outside appearances and speak some Christian hope, because you're holding onto something – what something? Christ crucified, risen and coming again. That's the everyday life of a disciple of Jesus. I pray that God grants you the grace to see beyond the temporary to the eternal – the grace to hope in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.