

## CLAIMING A RESILIENT SPIRIT 2 Timothy 1:1-9

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(online only)

Today, November 1, is known in the church calendar as All Saints Day. In our church, we define the word “saint” rather broadly. Saints are those persons we have known who have inspired us. Perhaps the parent or grandparent who encouraged you to develop a relationship with God. A saint could be that teacher who saw a talent in you that you would never have recognized on your own. Or a family friend who always showed interest in what you were learning. Some people are **quiet** saints. They don’t talk about themselves, but they exhibit qualities that you find admirable.

None of us becomes who we are all on our own. We are all influenced by others - by parents, teachers, coaches, friends. And saints can also be those people you’ve never met but whose life stories you’ve followed with interest. People whose art you’ve admired, whose music you’ve listened to over and over again, athletes and entrepreneurs who use their money to help others, men and women who have done something extraordinary despite facing obstacles, examples of courage and fortitude.

Our scripture passage for today comes from the second letter to Timothy. Timothy is a young leader in the early church, and this letter is written to encourage him to persevere during a difficult time. Scholars aren’t sure who wrote this letter. It’s purportedly written by Paul; his name’s on it. It surely was influenced by Paul and his ministry. Who exactly wrote it doesn’t really matter. The **point** is that it was **dangerous** to be a Christian leader - the danger came from both outside and inside the church.

The authorities of the Roman Empire were tired of the Christians. Every time they tried to shut down the Christian movement, extinguish the church for good, they would discover another spark somewhere else had begun to burn. The Christians refused to pledge their allegiance to Rome. They would not sacrifice to the Roman gods. Rome saw Christians as subversive, potentially disruptive to the social order. They needed to be squelched. Rome wouldn't tolerate such dissidence.

We know that Paul was jailed and persecuted for his faith. Many of his letters, including perhaps part of this one, were written from jail. You can't understand this letter unless you hear its words in the context of the persecuted church. Words of encouragement are one thing. Words of encouragement to someone whose faith may cost him his life — they take on far more significance.

Timothy has other problems, too. Internal problems. There are disputes going on inside the church about how they should worship, what exactly they should teach and believe.

Timothy has a lot to shoulder. And so he must have been so grateful to have this letter - imagine receiving a letter from a mentor, someone you've admired. It would be the kind of letter you'd keep and re-read. It's a passage full of emotion. It's obvious that it was written by someone who knows Timothy well and cares for him deeply.

"To Timothy, my dear child, I'm grateful to God; I constantly remember you in my prayers day and night."

And then the writer says, "I see your authentic faith, and I realize where it comes from. It comes from your mother Eunice and your grandmother Lois." Timothy reads this, and I see him setting the letter down for a moment to remember these two women, saints in his life, both of them leaders in the early church too. His grandmother gave her faith to

his mother, who passed it on to him. He remembers all of the stories they told him, the way they taught him to pray. Just remembering them begins to strengthen him.

The letter goes on: "I'm writing to remind you to revive God's gift that is in you." What is that gift? It's faith, it's our relationship with God, it's the calling you and I have received to follow in the ways of Jesus. This passage says that our faith is a gift, but it's not a gift you just open once. It's something you have to tend, like all living things, like all relationships. The NRSV version of the Bible says, "rekindle the gift of God that is within you." That imagery is more clear, isn't it? We know what it's like to tend a campfire. You don't just build a fire and let it go. No matter how big it is, how well it's burning, from time to time it will need more kindling or another log.

Timothy - and all Christians who read this letter - are reminded of what God gives us: a spirit that is not timid, but one that is powerful, loving and self-controlled. When we are at our best, when we are living out of our most genuine healthy selves, we are not timid but we are powerful, loving and self-controlled.

Friends, I wrote this sermon on Thursday, the day that the Ohio coronavirus numbers hit a record-high, climbing 37% in one day. I thought about those numbers. While working on the sermon, I received notification that another of our members was diagnosed. I read this passage again. I communicated with some of my relatives about what we'll do for the holidays this year. I received an email from someone in our church who is so anxious about the outcome of the election that he cannot sleep. I read our passage again.

"We cannot be timid. God has given us spirits that are powerful, loving and self-controlled." Here's how the Message version of the Bible puts it: "God doesn't want us to be shy with God's gifts, but bold and loving and sensible."

Here's what this passage says to me, to us, at this very moment: "We have the inner resources we need to get through this time." God wants us to be **bold** - to speak up for what is just and right. God wants us to be **loving** - love is always our guiding star. And sensible, self-controlled in the way we interact with one another. Those are the qualities, the values, God has placed within us.

Our job is to rekindle them from time to time, revive them, nurture them. We do that through self-care. We don't martyr ourselves, we don't let ourselves burn out. We learn to love ourselves, so that it will make sense when we try to love one another AS WE LOVE OURSELVES.

On this All Saints Day, I want to introduce you to a woman named Etty Hillesum. Not because she was perfect or because she's a role model in every way, but because she displayed extraordinary resilience in one of the most difficult circumstances in recent history. Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman working and studying in Amsterdam when Hitler came to power. We know exactly what she was thinking and doing the last two years she lived in Amsterdam because she kept a journal which has been published, along with letters she sent later from the Westerbork transport camp.

As the months go by, she becomes more and more certain that she will eventually be taken to a concentration camp. She hears of friends and acquaintances who have been taken away, some have died. She registers with the Gestapo, she wears a yellow star. Her fate begins to seem inevitable.

This 27 year old woman realizes that while she still has agency, still has the ability to make choices about how she will spend her time, she will use it to prepare herself for the ordeal that is to come. Instead of complaining, or sinking into despair, or allowing anger to consume her, she calmly prepares her inner self. You might say that she is

reviving her spirit, to use the words of our scripture passage for today - she is rekindling the gift of God that is within her.

She continues to teach, to tutor, to do the things that give her life joy and purpose, but she **deliberately** lives with **great awareness**. When she takes a walk, she notices the beauty of the trees that line the canal. She tries to memorize what she is seeing so that she will be able to recall it later. When rations become scarce, she savors each cup of coffee, drinking slowly, appreciating the experience. She chooses which books to read, hoping to have time to finish the ones that are helping to shape her own life philosophy. She reads the Bible, prays, and writes her thoughts and experiences.

She believes that life is beautiful. That belief is so deeply planted within her that nothing can take that away - even when she's at the transport camp and sees so much suffering, she continues to notice the one tree, the colors of the sunset, the joy at finding a friend and having a conversation.

Here's a quote from her diary: "even as we die a terrible death we are able to feel right up to the very last moment that life has meaning and beauty, that we have realized our potential and lived a good life."

Now some people could read her book and argue that she should have reacted differently. She shouldn't have just accepted her fate. Why didn't she try to hide or join the resistance? But she was true to herself. She listened to her own inner voice. Because she had such a calm center, she was able to provide comfort to many people in the camp. She wrote letters requesting supplies and food for her parents who were there with her, she used her connections to try to get certain vulnerable people released, she was a **beacon of light in a very grim place**.

Her own resistance was interior; she writes this: “Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.”

We don't know anything about how she was when she was finally transferred to Auschwitz - she was there a few months before she died. We do know that when she boarded the train from Westerbork to Auschwitz she and her family were singing, she waved goodbye to her friends, and she threw a postcard which a farmer later found and mailed to Amsterdam.

She would not let the Nazi regime take away her ability to think her own thoughts and choose her own responses.

She composed this prayer from the Westerbork camp: “You have made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised toward Your heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in my bed and rest in You, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer. Things come and go in a deeper rhythm, and people must be taught to listen; it is the most important thing we have to learn in this life. The beat of my heart has grown deeper, more active, and yet more peaceful, and it is as if I were all the time storing up inner riches.” (The words of Etty Hillesum)

On this day, November 1, 2020, All Saints Day, we are living through a pandemic. We are two days away from an election that is causing many people to feel that - no matter what the outcome - our nation will still be bitterly divided and perhaps more dangerous. It

helps me to remember that we are not the first to live through challenging times.

**Resilience comes from within.** God has placed within each of us - not a spirit of timidity - but a spirit of courage and love.

There are many faithful ways to live in this time. Some people are called to be activists, and some people are filling their freezers with soup so that they'll be able to care for their neighbors during the winter. Some people are spending time alone praying, and some are driving others to the polls on Tuesday. The point is that **we each have choices.** We don't have to let the external circumstances determine the course of our lives.

Let us pray. Holy God, help us to live in these days with integrity, courage and love. We know we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Amen.