

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“So Close, Yet So Faithful”

Scripture Lesson: 2 Timothy 4: 1-8

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, February 23, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

2 Timothy 4: 1-8

1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: 2 proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. 5 As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

6 As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

So Close, Yet So Faithful

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

“So close, yet so far.” Have you heard that phrase before?

We had a young adult trivia night some time ago – something we need to resurrect once Dr. Sutton gets here. Well, our First (Scots) team actually won, but it was close! Not surprisingly, there were some answers in which we were very confident, and of course, there were some answers about which we were clueless...

But then there were some questions for which we had the correct answer first—but we second-guessed ourselves—and we ended up changing our minds. We were so close... and yet so far.

Perhaps we’ve experienced that kind of phenomenon in our relationships—everything seems to be going well, and an altogether fruitful relationship seems well within our reach—but for some reason, the distance between where we are and where we want to be just can’t be bridged.

Back in the day, Darryl Hall and John Oates had a song about love that didn’t reach its potential. The song described a relationship that suffered from an emotional disconnect—so close, yet so far away.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible speaks to another aspect of that old phrase—something that is within physical reach but is nevertheless unattainable. Moses was standing on top of Mt. Nebo, and he was looking over at the Promised Land! But he would not be permitted to go there.

Imagine the burden he felt—the weight of unfinished business. For 40 years he’s been waiting for this moment, and God has put him on top of a mountain and is showing him the land that He had sworn to

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Oh, Moses is so close. But listen again to what God says: "I've let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

Imagine Moses having to stay behind, having to say goodbye to family and friends as they moved on without him into God's promised future.

Now, I should add that this was not a total surprise to Moses. In the first chapter of Deuteronomy, he says to the people: "Even with me the Lord was angry on your account, saying, 'You also shall not enter there.'"

You see, Moses knew ahead of time that he would not enter into the Promised Land—but there he was, 120 years old, with unimpaired sight and unabated vigor! There's no doubt that Moses had the strength to continue the journey... he's so close... yet so far!

Pairing that story with our New Testament lesson this morning, it makes me wonder about the races we are called to run as people of faith—and what it means that sometimes those proverbial finish lines come earlier than expected. And when they do, I wonder how our life, like the life of Moses, can be: "So Close, Yet So Faithful!"

One of our church members, who tunes in each week remotely, is Mary Nance Huff. We were talking last week about how many baptisms we celebrated last year... and the number, as I recall, was 19.

Naturally, we also had a number of deaths—those celebrations of life at the other end of life's spectrum—and while many of those services happen for a person who has lived a reasonably long life, sometimes it feels like they haven't lived nearly long enough.

It has been said that when an older adult transitions from this life to the next, they take with them treasured memories—something of our past. But when a young person dies—or perhaps when they pass earlier than we would expect—it has been said that they take with them something of our future.

I would add that whether a person is young or old—and whether we are ready or not—those transitions in life... they provide our church family with a blessed opportunity to come alongside those who grieve.

I bring this up because later this morning we are commissioning a group of Stephen Ministers whose job is to be present and available during the uniquely personal and often difficult circumstances of life. Because, whether we care to admit it or not, sometimes life's finish lines come early.

Maybe it is a matter of life or death, or perhaps it is a relationship that has ended, or an addiction that just won't quit and it's killing our dreams...

Maybe we are healing, or hoping and praying for healing—and gone are those carefree days when we didn't have to worry about being around people because our immune system is compromised.

Finish lines come in all colors... and in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes, they may look like Moses—a man who devoted his life to a dream that he would not live to see.

Metaphorically speaking, what is that book we have helped to write that we will never read ourselves? Or that grove of trees that we helped to plant but under the shade of which we'll never sit?

Ah, we will always be "so close, yet so far" to one thing or another. But can it truly be said of us that we are, "So Close, Yet So Faithful?"

Moses, the great prophet and patriarch that he was—when we see him die at the Lord's command on just this side of the Promised Land—what do we do with that? What can we learn from that about being faithful?

When I hear the great church hymn declare that "We fly forgotten—as a dream dies at the opening day," it often reminds me of Moses. But more to the point, it reminds me that the future ultimately belongs to God.

Oh, God uses who we are... and the things we say and do to bring about His good purposes. But, at the end of the day, our future is shaped not by our will, but by God's will!

The people in our Old Testament lesson this morning... they were entering into the Promised Land alright, but it wasn't Moses who was going to get them there. No! God was going to get them there!

And this doesn't mean that God's people—Moses in particular—it doesn't mean that we don't have a role to play. But it does mean that in our faithful hearts we come to realize that we are merely instruments of God's larger symphony of grace. It is not our symphony to write. It is not our symphony to conduct.

Another element to the story of Moses—and one that we seldom consider—is that Moses *did* make it to the Promised Land.

The Bible tells us that: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses." So how is that possible? Moses was dead and buried in some unknown location in Moab.

Well, when we read that, through the leadership of Joshua, the people continued to do as the Lord had commanded through Moses, we realize that Moses *did* go into the Promised Land! In fact, he went into the future as any of us go into the future—he went by way of a legacy of faithfulness!

All of our stories—be it our childhood dreams, our adult plans and visions—our lives—they evolve. And hopes and dreams and plans and visions... they are realized in some ways, and in other ways they aren't.

Friends, whether we are fighting the good fight or finishing the race... what is imperative is that we also keep the faith!

Elijah left in a whirlwind and had to leave his bewildered protégé behind! And King David was never able to build the temple that he had hoped to—his son would have to pick up that mantle. And surely John the Baptizer wanted to do more... before his life was taken from him.

The disciples—when Jesus took the bread and the cup, and when he said to them, "Do this in remembrance of me"—they didn't want to hear that...

Palm Sunday was just a week in the rear-view mirror, and all Jerusalem had come out—this was the high noon of Jesus' popularity!

What do you mean, "do this in remembrance of you"?

We've got big plans for you, Jesus—and by the way, they don't include the cross.

You're so close!... yet so faithful.

None of us will ever see or understand the full and final work of our labors. We won't be able to see how everything turns out!

But here's the miracle... we will, by God's grace, have a lasting effect on the future, because each generation is profoundly influenced by the faith of those who have preceded them.

Nowhere in the Bible does it say that our journey will be easy, and nowhere in the Bible does it say that our journey will end at a time of our own choosing.

Sometimes life presents us with unexpected things—unexpected endings! But it is never the end of us. Because God's love endures, so do we!

Our greatest joys are realized not always in their accomplishment, but in the journey toward those goals. A life that is lived with that kind of awareness—mindful of the fact that our purpose is bound to a greater purpose, and that our faithful legacy bears fruit long after we are gone—

That will allow us to one day say, as Paul said—and I'm sure Moses could have said as well:

"I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."