

Hopeful Resilience

4 of 4 in *Christmas Unwrapped*

Dec. 24, 2022

1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 4:5-8

Well a very warm welcome to all, whether you're here in person, or with us online.

This December, rather than teaching on more traditional Christmas texts, we've been exploring various Advent-related themes in the Pastoral Epistles—a collection of three short New Testament letters written by the apostle Paul— namely 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

In particular, we've been looking a prominent theme in those letters that relates very closely to Advent. That theme is *epiphany*, which comes from a Greek word referring to the visible, tangible and personal appearing of an otherwise invisible deity.

At this time of year we celebrate the First Advent— the first epiphany or appearing of God in Christ at Christmas. And we also look forward to the Second Advent—God's second epiphany in Christ when he will come again to set the whole world right, once and for all.

The heart of epiphany is that God is a God who makes himself *known* to us—he *reveals* himself to us— through the flesh-and-blood person of Jesus Christ—much like a gift is revealed once you unwrap it. Accordingly, this series is called *Christmas Unwrapped*.

In this final message of the series, we're going to look at a couple of passages in the Pastoral Epistles that reveal how we can find hopeful resilience in light of the first and second epiphanies of God in Jesus Christ.

Hopeful resilience. Because what has been said of 2020 and 2021 can also be said of 2022:

This has been an unusually difficult year for many.

Has it been a difficult year for you, I wonder?

It's been a difficult year for me in many ways—not a bad year thanks to God's sustaining grace and goodness— but a difficult year, to be sure. Whether it be:

- Walking with our daughter through her chronic health issues.
- Leading a fast-growing congregation through the changes, complexities and dynamics that are part and parcel of any organization's emergence from a global pandemic.

- Helping navigate my 96-year old dad through the daily challenges, fears and uncertainties he faces at this late stage of his life.
- Journeying as a pastor with various staff members and congregants who—much more so than in pre-pandemic times— are experiencing a range of struggles, anxieties and hurts— as is the case with people everywhere these days .

Indeed, it's been yet another tough year for many, perhaps including you. Raise your hand if you feel like you could use some *hopeful resilience* in your life right about now.

Resilience can be defined as “the capacity to withstand or recover from difficulties.” It has to do with the ability of an object, a person, or a group of people to spring back into shape after being stretched. Resilience is about our mental, emotional and spiritual elasticity.

In this short teaching, we're going to explore how you can find hopeful resilience through God's epiphanies in Christ, because they offer us two things: *A story to guide us* and *a promise to strengthen us*. First, they offer:

1. A story to guide us.

When you walk into a shopping mall, hospital, theme park or pretty much any large venue, chances are you will encounter a big map marked with a red star underscored by these three words: *You are here*.

Such maps show you the big picture, as well as where you are in that picture. Such maps help you find your bearings, and give you a sense of where to go. Oh, if only we had something like this for our lives—something to help us navigate our days in this often complex and confusing world!

Well, those who follow Jesus *do* according to Paul in 1 Timothy 3:16, where he writes:

Without question, this is the great mystery of our faith:

Christ was revealed in a human body
and vindicated by the Spirit.
He was seen by angels
and announced to the nations.
He was believed in throughout the world
and taken to heaven in glory.¹

¹ 1 Timothy 3:16 (NLT)

In writing these words, Paul is actually quoting a hymn that the ancient Christian church used to sing. In thumbnail version, the hymn tells the story of how God is saving the world through his epiphany, or appearing, in Jesus Christ.

At his birth, and throughout his earthly ministry to follow, *Christ was revealed in a human body*, says the text, which is precisely what we celebrate at Christmas.

And he was *vindicated by the Spirit*. Although the worldly authorities of his day deemed him worthy of crucifixion, God vindicated Christ by raising his once lifeless body from the dead through the power of the Holy Spirit.²

Then, following his bodily resurrection, *He was seen by angels*. This happened when he ascended back into God's sphere, where the angels live. As the hymn puts it, he was *taken to heaven in glory* until the time of his second epiphany, when he will come to earth again and forever set the world right.

This Christ has also been *announced to the nations*, says the text, and *was believed in throughout the world*. This is the ongoing mission of the church—the mission of all who follow Jesus— to tell this Story of stories to the world so that everyone who puts their faith in Christ may know his salvation— so that the lives of people everywhere may be caught up in and transformed by his greater Story.

According to Paul, the words of this Christ-hymn constitute *the great mystery of our faith*. In New Testament times, the term “mystery” was often used to refer to hidden spiritual knowledge known only to an inner circle of people who had been initiated into a religious sect. In this sense, a “mystery” was like a special code that contained the very secret of spiritual life for the few who were privileged enough to be “in the know” about it.

But in our passage, Paul challenges all other spiritualities and philosophies by declaring a “mystery” that's really no secret at all, because God has revealed it not to some inner circle, but to the whole world!

You see, Paul's conviction is that the Story sketched out in this Christ-hymn is the master Story that governs all other stories. The story of your life and the story of mine— indeed the story of the whole world— is ultimately governed by the Story of the God who reveals himself to us and gives himself for us in the flesh-and-blood person of Jesus Christ.

² See also Romans 1:3.

Especially in these dark and difficult times, you must remember that there's always a battle for the narrative—a battle for who gets to frame the story of this world and of our lives. Among the most important questions you can ask yourself are:

What story or stories do I look to make sense of life in this world?

Who gets to frame the story of my life?

Will it be your peers? Will it be some expression of popular culture? Will it be your family or ethnic group or country of origin? Will it be social or the news media? Will it be commercialism, consumerism, or careerism?

We build resilience when we refuse to let such stories—these competing narratives—warp our perspective, or unduly influence our feelings. We build resilience when we submit our lives to the master narrative of Christ's story, because it's the one Story that ultimately governs the story of this world, and it's the one Story from which you and I derive our true identity, and the very meaning and purpose of our lives.

Not unlike the big map at the mall, it is the story of Christ—God revealed in the flesh— that shows you the true big picture, and helps you find your bearings in this complex and confusing world.

And this contributes to *hopeful resilience*— even in the face of difficulty and darkness. When you let your life be guided by the master story of Christ, it gives you bounce-back when things get hard, because it orients your life in this world. It's the compass that always shows you true north, and helps get your life back on track when you've veered off-course.

Don't you find it interesting that Paul shares a *hymn*—a short poem with 6 stanzas designed to be set to music— as a means to help us hold onto Christ's master story in the face of the many competing stories in this world?

With this in mind, my challenge to you for the New Year is to make Sunday worship attendance a top priority in your life—whether you worship here at Cornerstone, or at another church. Why make Sunday worship a top priority? Well, Sunday worship it is the place where we sing the songs of Christ's story each week. Sunday worship is also the place where we gather each week to be taught and reminded of master narrative of Christ— God revealed in a human body.

As one author explains, “Worship catches our mental life and turns it toward Jesus. It builds resilience” because it helps us to stay focused on God and on Christ’s story. “It opens our spirit to him, allowing us to receive his love, comfort and the strength that prevails.”³

Speaking of strength that prevails, we can also find hopeful resilience through God’s epiphanies in Christ because they include:

2. A promise to strengthen us.

Now, we jump from 1 Timothy over to 2 Timothy—which Paul wrote from a Roman prison cell.

Paul had been in prison before for preaching the gospel of Jesus, but this time, he senses that he won’t be coming out alive. His execution is imminent. Knowing this, what final words would Paul have for his young protégé, Timothy?

These were Paul’s words for Timothy, and they are for us as well:

But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing [*epiphany*].⁴

When Paul says *keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry*, Paul is essentially telling Timothy to *be resilient* in the face of the difficulties he faces in life and as a servant of Christ—including the imminent death of his mentor.

There’s no doubt that Paul himself has been resilient. He explains that for his entire ministry career, his life had been poured out sacrificially for the cause of Christ, not unlike worshippers poured out *drink offerings* to God in the Old Testament. And by God’s grace, he

³ John Eldredge, *Resilient: Restoring Your Weary Soul in These Turbulent Times*, p. 181.

⁴ 2 Timothy 4:5-8 (NLT)

remained resilient through it all, to the point that on the eve of his death he could proclaim, *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*

Paul knew that what kept him resilient in the face of his hardships would also keep Timothy resilient. And what has kept me resilient, says Paul, is God's promise that *there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.*

In the New Testament, the phrase "that day" almost always refers to the second coming of Christ, his second Advent, appearing or epiphany— that future day when he will return to set the whole world right once and for all.

Paul was encouraging Timothy—and us— with this promise, because he knew it didn't apply only to himself, *but also to all who have longed for his appearing*— for all who have longed for Christ's second epiphany.

When Paul speaks of the Lord awarding us the crown of righteousness, he's using a sports metaphor. In the ancient Olympic Games of Paul's day, a victorious athlete would be crowned with a laurel wreath. This crowning would be a moment so glorious for the athlete that it would make all of the sacrifice, effort and pain that he put into training worth it.

It's kind of like if you were to ask members of Argentina's soccer team if all their hard work and sacrifice that culminated in their team's World Cup victory last week was worth it. How do you think they would answer? To a person, they would say, "Are you kidding me? Of course it was worth it! A million times over, it was worth every single drop of my blood, sweat and tears!"

Being awarded a World Cup is but a drop in the ocean compared to the reward the Lord Jesus Christ himself will personally bestow on us at his second appearing or epiphany. Paul says Christ will bestow upon us not a perishable laurel wreath in recognition of our own achievements, but rather an everlasting crown of the perfect righteousness that he has achieved on our behalf through his cross and resurrection.

Elsewhere in 2 Timothy, Paul adds that:

If we have died with [Christ], we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. ⁵

⁵ 2 Timothy 2:11-13 (NIV)

At his second epiphany we will live with Christ himself. Can you imagine how glorious and wonderful that will be—to live with the Lord Jesus? And we know from scripture that we will live with him in a fully restored creation, and the kingdoms of the world will become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ. ⁶ We will be given resurrection bodies just like his own, that can no longer wear out or succumb to injury or illness! ⁷

And *we will also reign with him*, says the text.

We may not often think of ourselves as kings and queens who will rule over a restored creation, but this too is part of the future God promises us in Christ. On that day when he returns—the day of his second epiphany— will be raised to rule with him, and given unimaginably important roles to play and richly meaningful and fulfilling work to do in a fully restored creation—the new heavens and new earth.

And when we keep in in view, God’s promise of our glorious and eternal future in Christ gives us hopeful resilience. When we learn to *long for his appearing*, as Paul puts it, we find strength to carry on in the face of our hardships, because we know that our troubles, or even death itself, do not get the last word of the story of our lives. Christ does.

Focusing on the promise of Christ’s second epiphany will help you to *keep your head in all situations*, as Paul says to Timothy. It helps you to *endure hardship*. It helps you to *do the work of an evangelist*—to share your faith in Jesus with others who need to know his Story. And it helps you to faithfully *discharge all the duties of all your ministry*, whatever they may be, even when times get hard.

In other words, focusing on the promise of Christ’s second epiphany leads to a life of *hopeful resilience*. My prayer is that you may know and experience this hopeful resilience now, in the New Year to come, and always.

There’s a popular book on the market entitled *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*.

If you are persuaded that the Christ Story—the Story of God who appearing in the flesh, dying, rising again, ascending into heaven, and one day returning to set the whole world right— is the best story—the Story you want to build your life and stake your future on— then I want to encourage you to dive deeper into this church community—because it is Christ’s Story that shapes who Cornerstone is as a people.

⁶ See Revelation 11:15

⁷ See Philippians 3:21

If you're new here, let me encourage you to **fill out a visitor card** (<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/connectwithus>) whether you do so electronically, or whether you fill out a hard copy found in the seat pouches—and if you do that latter, you can just slip the card into the offering bag when it goes around after this message. We'd love to be able to share some info with you about how you can get further connected at Cornerstone.

And one last thing for some of you to consider. If you haven't yet been baptized as a follower of Jesus, I wonder if the Lord would lead you to do so in the New Year.

Baptism is a basic step of following Jesus—a basic step in allowing your story to be plunged into and shaped by the larger Story of the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ, like we've been talking about today. Our next baptism service is scheduled for Sunday, February 12th. To indicate your interest in baptism, or simply to learn more about it, please visit www.cornerstonechurch.ca/baptism.

Let's pray together:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, as we celebrate your coming at Christmas, prepare our heart and our lives for your second coming, your second epiphany on that day when you return to earth to make all things new. Even as we long for your appearing on that day, give us your hopeful resilience that we may remain faithful to you, come what may, and that our lives may be governed by your Story, both now and forever. In your name we pray, dear Jesus. Amen.

Benediction [at end of service]:

The light has splintered the darkness; Hope is ours once more.
The light calls us forward, remembering the past and walking confidently into the future. Christ has come. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.
Amen.