

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, March 24, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“STANDING, FALLING, STANDING AGAIN”

1 Corinthians 10:12 “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”

The title of today’s sermon may lead you to think that it’s for people who are learning to skate or ski. Well, it’s not, but I certainly remember my first time on ice. My mother took me one afternoon to the local arena. I was six years old. She put my new skates on, took me out on the ice, and I’m sure she was doing her best to hold me up. But before I even reached the blue line I fell, not on my backside, but on my head. And without a helmet (and who wore helmets nearly 6 decades ago?) I got a nasty goose egg on my forehead. Well, that ended my first skating lesson and I remember holding a cold compress on the bump when I got home. Thankfully, there were no permanent effects. My next lesson was on a sheet of ice in a field. This time I leaned on a chair and pushed it around. My parents stood close to lift me to my feet again should I fall. But I soon got the hang of it and after a few skating lessons, I was happily standing on the ice by myself and proudly speeding around like I was really someone. “Standing, Falling Down, Standing Again.” My sermon today is not for would be skaters or skiers. This sermon is for people, like many of us here today, who are standing firm in the faith. Paul says, “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” (1 Corinthians 10:12)

Many churches today are seeker sensitive. They gear their mission, their worship services and message towards people who have had little exposure to the Christian faith. Sometimes this results in simpler worship services and in sermons which outline the basics of the Gospel and deal with questions that seekers may have. Now this is a good and worthy mission. Every church needs to be involved in it to some degree. For there are many spiritual seekers today, who have come to realize that their deepest needs and longings can’t be satisfied by money and power and material possessions. So the church’s mission is to proclaim the Gospel and tell people that their spiritual emptiness can only be filled by a relationship with the living God through his Son Jesus Christ. And the church invites people to enter into such a relationship. Many such churches are filled with seekers and those who have recently made a Christian commitment. The challenge for such churches is how to maintain a ministry to seekers and new Christians, while at the same time promoting spiritual growth and maturity among those who have been there for a while.

In some ways, the Corinthian church was similar to today’s seeker sensitive church. Paul and others had proclaimed the Gospel in the rather immoral city of Corinth. And some people had responded to the message. They had accepted Christ by faith and baptism, and together started a new Christian community. They were exploring life in Christ together. They had put old ways behind. Now there were controversies and problems, but mostly these new Christians were finding joy in their new life, in Christian fellowship, and in the freedom and hope that Christ gives. Love and joy and peace and other fruits of the Spirit were growing among them. They were

standing on the firm rock of Christ. But Paul knew that temptations still surrounded them in Corinth, and he didn't want them to become overconfident. He wrote, "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall."

Now many of us here today are not new Christians. We've been believers for years, decades perhaps. We love the church and its fellowship. Many of us can say confidently "On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand." That's great. It's a real blessing. But Paul's word is not just for new Christians, but for veteran Christians, as well. It's a word of encouragement and warning for all Christians. "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall."

First, let me remind you that we Christians are standing on the rock of Jesus Christ.

Paul begins this passage by referring to the Hebrews passing through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. They were baptized into the cloud of God's presence and into Moses' leadership and so passed through the Sea. In the wilderness God provided them with daily manna and water from a rock to drink. But this was not only physical refreshment; it was spiritual food and drink. Paul writes, "For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ."

Do you know that Christ appeared sometimes in the Old Testament? No, not as the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth, but in other ways and forms. For example, it seems that the mysterious priest named Melchizedek, the King of Salem, to whom Abraham paid tribute was a manifestation of Christ. In Babylon three Hebrews were thrown into the fiery furnace. And yet they were unharmed and King Nebuchadnezzar was amazed, exclaiming, "I see a fourth man in the furnace with them. And he looks like a son of the gods." Was not the fourth man Christ himself? Then there was Christ the moving rock from which the Hebrews drank in the wilderness.

But we know Christ as the incarnate one, Jesus, who became flesh at Bethlehem, who lived our life, revealed the Father to us, taught us God's truth and performed the very works of God. In obedience to the Father's plan and will, he laid down his sinless life for sinners, and was raised in victory on the third day, decisively defeating Satan, and setting believers free from the power of sin and evil and death. Christ is the solid rock on whom we stand. He is the rock of our salvation. By faith in him we are safe forever in the Father's care. He feeds us with the living bread, and nourishes us at his table. Christ is the rock, the living stone on which the church is built.

Now because we stand on the rock of Christ, there are other realities that Christians stand on. Because we stand on Christ we also stand on the truth of Scripture. You don't have to be a fundamentalist to recognize that the Bible is the fundamental source book for our faith, uniquely inspired by God to reveal God's plan of salvation and to lead us to faith and new life in Christ.

Because we stand on Christ the rock we also stand on the reality of the sacraments. We recognize baptism as the sacrament of entry into the Body of Christ, the sacrament which declares that no matter at what age baptism takes place, entry into God's family happens by God's saving act of grace in Christ, not by our own works. He loved us before we loved him. And

we recognize Holy Communion as the sacrament of continuation. Christ feeds us with spiritual food at his table for the strengthening and renewal of our faith.

And because we stand on Christ the rock, we also stand on the necessity of the church. The church is not an optional extra for Christians. Christ himself said, "I will build my church, and the powers of hell shall not prevail against it." The church, the ecclesia, the gathered people of God, is a necessary aspect of the Christian faith. To be in Christ by baptism and faith is to be in the Body of Christ, the church. Christ is the living Stone and we are living stones in his spiritual house.

So we are standing on Christ the rock. And if you are standing firm on the living stone, that is good, very good, that is exactly where God wants you to be. In fact, he has put you there.

But now let's consider Paul's word of warning. "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall."

This is Paul's word of warning to the Corinthians and to us. You may be standing on the firm rock of Christ. Your faith may be solid and secure. But don't be overconfident. Watch out for those ill winds that blow and may cause you to slip and fall.

Paul spoke of temptations that caused the Hebrews to fall in the wilderness. There was the temptation to worship an idol of their own making rather than the true God who had set them free. There was the temptation to sexual immorality. To fall back into the old immoral ways of Corinth was a constant temptation for the Corinthian Christians. The Hebrews put Christ to the test, says Paul, meaning that they thought no matter how they lived they would be safe in God's care, because after all, they were God's people. And some of them fell because they grumbled against God, complaining with ingratitude about his provisions.

We too have to watch for temptations that might cause us to fall or to slip off the firm rock. Idolatry is one - putting money, possessions, security, success, comfort, even family, in the ultimate place that belongs only to God. We can be tempted to fall by the immorality of our day, which seems to go lower all the time. We can be tempted to fall by those who plant doubts in our heads. I heard someone say smugly the other day, "Science has proved the Bible to be false." Science has done no such thing. In fact, I would say that science undergirds the wisdom of Scripture. The Bible answers the who of creation, not the how of creation. The Bible deals with who God is and his relationship with his creation and his creatures. Science is actually a gift of God, allowing us to discover the marvels of his creation. Furthermore, the discipline of archeology has been a great friend to the historical narratives of the Bible. And if archaeology undergirds the Bible's accuracy, then we needn't doubt the Bible's truth in spiritual matters. But when someone makes a smug statement like that doubts may arise in our minds. Some people may even fall because of it.

Here's something else to watch for. Every year right around Christmas or Easter, articles appear in the media, questioning the reality of Christ's birth or his resurrection. It never fails. This kind of thing can cause believers to slip off the firm rock. It's actually the work of the evil

one, the destroyer, the ancient serpent, who delights when God's people fall. So we need to be careful. "If you think you are standing watch out that you do not fall."

But I want to finish today with this. Remember the message is "Standing, Falling, Standing Again." What happens if we fall? For we all fall at times. They are times when doubts assail us and even overcome us; times when our faith no longer seems to comfort or strengthen us, times when we fall into idolatry or sin or ingratitude towards God. We slip off the firm rock of Christ. God always provides us with a way out of temptation, but sometimes we fail to take it. The tempter takes hold of us and drags us down.

But we are in Christ. So we really can believe Paul's promise that "nothing in life or in death or in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." So when we fall, we fall into the loving arms of our Father God. And in his mercy he puts us on our feet again. He sets us back on the firm rock of Jesus Christ. The only thing that would prevent that from happening is to wrongly believe that you have fallen beyond God's love and grace. But in truth you never do. There is always a strong hand reaching out to lift you up and put you back in place again. "If you think you are standing watch out that you do not fall." Yes, it is good to stand and not fall, but if and when you do fall, don't despair. For you have fallen into the strong and loving arms of God. And those arms will not only put you back in place but hold you safe for all eternity. "For the eternal God is our dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms."