

"God Is With Us Here"

2 Timothy 3:14–4:8, 16–18

There is something about living in rural Nebraska that can teach us about the presence of God.

In some parts of the state, you can drive for miles and see little more than fields, pasture, grain bins, a farmhouse here and there, and an enormous Nebraska sky stretching from horizon to horizon. Those spaces are a little harder for me to find here, but there are a few deserted minimum maintenance roads. Sometimes the quiet is almost startling. Sometimes you can stand outside at the end of the day and feel like you are the only person for miles. Depending on what's happening in your life, some days we can do this in the midst of others.

But you are not alone.

That is one of the great promises of Scripture: **God is present. God is here. God is with us.**

The theological word for this is *omnipresence*. It means that God is present everywhere. There is no place we can go where God is absent. There is no field so remote, no hospital room so lonely, no kitchen table where we sit worrying, no funeral home filled with grief, no difficult conversation, no season of uncertainty where God says, "You are on your own."

God is there.

Paul writes to Timothy in a difficult season. Timothy is facing opposition. Paul himself knows that his earthly journey is nearing its end. He says, "The time of my departure has come." He knows that suffering lies ahead. Yet Paul does not tell Timothy that faithfulness will make life easy.

Instead, he tells him to **continue**.

"Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed."

That word matters.

Continue.

Keep going.

Remain rooted in what you have been taught. Hold on to Scripture. Proclaim the good news. Be persistent. Stay faithful whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.

That sounds like good advice for a Nebraska congregation.

Because we know something about continuing.

Farmers understand that you do not control everything. You can prepare the soil, plant the seed, repair the machinery, watch the weather, and work long hours—but eventually you have to trust.

You cannot command the rain.

You cannot stop the hail.

You cannot make the wind blow or the wind stop.

You cannot guarantee what the market will do.

There are years when everything seems to come together, and there are years when you wonder how you will make it through.

And through all of it, God is present.

God is present when the fields are green.

God is present when the crops are harvested.

God is present when the drought comes.

God is present when the checkbook looks good—and when it doesn't.

God is present when the church is full—and when the pews have empty spaces.

God is present when a family gathers around a birthday table—and when that same family gathers around a hospital bed or a casket.

Paul says, "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength."

Notice that Paul does not say, "The Lord prevented everything difficult from happening."

A couple of years ago, Kirstin Hannah's *Four Winds* was designated as a campus-wide read at UNL. It follows the life of a woman, Elsa, who was born in Oklahoma and not particularly liked by her parents through her coming of age during the Dust Bowl followed by her migration with thousands of other Okies to southern California where

she becomes a part of the labor movement among migrant farm workers. While this is a work of fiction, the vivid detail in which Hannah described life on the Oklahoma farm where Elsa lived after marrying led Chancellor Green to urge all members of the university community to read and discuss this book as a way to understand the perseverance of Great Plains people. It coincided with adopting the “in our grit, our glory” tagline. This perseverance relies heavily on an omnipresent God.

He says, “**The Lord stood by me.**”

That is the promise.

Sometimes we pray for God to remove the difficulty. And sometimes God does. But sometimes the answer to our prayer is not that the storm disappears. Sometimes the answer is that Christ stands beside us in the storm.

God does not promise that we will never walk through dark valleys.

God promises that we will never walk through them alone.

Think about the words of Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.” (Aside, maybe it’s just me, but the voice in my head always does Metallica whenever the twenty-third psalm is mentioned ...)

Not *you were with me*.

Not *you will eventually be with me*.

You are with me.

Right now.

Here.

Paul experienced that presence. He says that when others deserted him, the Lord stood by him. Human beings may leave us. Friends may disappoint us. People we love may die. Circumstances may change.

But Christ remains.

And that is why Paul can say at the end of his life, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Those words are not the boast of a man who had an easy life.

They are the testimony of someone who discovered that God's presence was greater than his circumstances.

That is what we are called to discover, too.

Perhaps you are carrying something this morning that nobody else in this congregation knows about.

Maybe you are worried about a child or grandchild.

Maybe there is financial pressure.

Maybe your health has changed.

Maybe you are grieving someone whose chair is still empty at the family table.

Maybe you are wondering what the future holds for this church, this community, or this farm.

Whatever it is, hear the promise of Scripture:

God is here.

Not merely in Jerusalem.

Not merely in the great cathedrals.

Not merely in moments when we feel especially spiritual.

God is here—in this congregation, in this community, in our homes, in our fields, in our work, in our sorrow, in our celebrations.

And most especially, God has made his presence known to us in Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is called Emmanuel: **"God is with us."**

And at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus promises, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

From beginning to end, the gospel is the story of God's presence.

God with us.

So continue, dear friends.

Continue in faith.

Continue in love.

Continue serving your neighbors.

Continue telling the story of Jesus.

Continue gathering around Word and Sacrament.

Continue praying for one another.

Continue trusting when you cannot see what comes next.

Because wherever the road leads, you will not walk it alone.

The God who was with you yesterday is with you today.

The God who is with you today will be with you tomorrow.

And when our earthly race is finished, the God who stood beside Paul will stand beside us.

The final word is not fear.

It is not uncertainty.

It is not death.

The final word is Christ.

And Christ is with us.

Here.

Now.

Always.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.