

Forward in Faith!

Psalm 78:1–7 (NIV84) ¹ O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. ² I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old— ³ what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. ⁴ We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. ⁵ He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, ⁶ so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. ⁷ Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.

In Christ Jesus, whose word gives life to us and our children, dear fellow redeemed,

Life was hard for Bill Grob – partly because of choices he had made and partly because of the times in which he lived. Born in January 1900, young Bill witnessed two world wars and, like so many others, suffered through the Great Depression sandwiched in between them. Years later a work-related injury and a failed business venture put him deep in debt. Bill was sixty years old before he could think of buying his own home. He had no way of knowing it at the time, but he would live on this earth only another 10 years after that.

Life was hard for Bill Grob. No doubt he dreamed of a better life for his children and grandchildren, but there was nothing he could do to make that dream a reality. He had only a mortgage to leave his heirs. Still, he wished to pass along something by which to be remembered – one treasure – a gold pocket watch that he himself had inherited and which he gave to his grandson. Bill Grob, Grandpa Grob, my mother’s father, gave this watch to me on my 10th birthday, just nine months before he died. It was his wish that I would take good care of his gift and when the time came, pass it along to my grandchild. I’ve had this watch for nearly 48 years. I can’t say that I’ve ever used it, for fear that it would be lost or broken. But what I can say is that, thanks to Grandpa, from a very young age I’ve been familiar with the concept of a legacy – the act of passing along a gift from one generation to the next. For many years now, I’ve thought about my own legacy. What will I pass along? Grandpa’s watch, of course, if it lasts. But what else? What do I have that’s worth passing on? Have you thought about your legacy? What treasure will you pass along? There’s no better answer than the one God puts before us today. His Word will give us a glimpse into our future, whether that be distant or near at hand, and through his eyes we’ll look at the legacy that can be ours under the theme: Forward in Faith!

Actually, “Forward in Faith” will not only serve as the theme of today’s sermon, but will soon become familiar to all of us as the theme of our proposed building project here at Mount Olive. As you walked into church you may have caught a glimpse of the building plans that have been drawn up based on your input. Plans are critical to any building project, even the project God is working on. He’s building a church, not of brick and mortar, but of living stones. That’s how God refers to the people of which his church is made. He carefully, lovingly sets these souls into place by calling them to faith in Jesus through his gospel. You might imagine that such important work would be left to highly trained professionals—maybe to the angels themselves. But that’s not what God has chosen to do. He has other plans, plans that the psalmist lays out for us in these verses of our text: **“[The Lord] decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, ⁶ so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. ⁷ Then they**

would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.” (Psalm 78:5-6).

The plan is simple: God gives his Word, law and gospel, to prophets and apostles for the purpose of proclaiming God’s holy decrees and his saving deeds to sinful human beings who, in turn, proclaim God’s truth to their children, who tell the next generation of sinners, who tell the next generation, and so forth. Simple, right? But can it work? Can God build his church this way? The psalmist answers our question not just with words, but by his own example: **“O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. ² I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old...” (Psalm 78:1-2).** The psalmist is taking his place in God’s plan. In fact, this entire psalm is a parable that presents the history of God’s people, sins and all, to show how gracious God is in dealing with rebels. God’s grace is something unexpected, wouldn’t you agree? You wouldn’t expect God to show compassion to people who naturally hate him. You wouldn’t expect God to save sinners by sending his own Son to live life as our Substitute and die our death in hell. Instead, you’d expect an angry God to punish us in his vengeance. That would be a reasonable expectation. But here’s a place where reason works against us, concealing from us the saving truth about God, truth that would remain hidden unless God himself steps in and reveals his undeserved love to us in words and actions. That’s what God does here through the psalmist. And how did the psalmist learn of God’s hidden love? He tells us that he spoke only **“what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us.” (Psalm 78:3).**

The psalmist, Asaph, learned of God’s love from his forefathers in the faith, parents, grandparents and teachers. Now, fast forward three thousand years to our own day. Here we are, proof that God’s plan is still working, he’s still growing his church, one soul at a time and in his grace, he’s added our souls to the number being saved. How has he done that? Through his gospel of course, a gospel that he has brought to you and me through the people he’s placed in our lives. Many of us came to know Jesus’ saving love as infants at the baptismal font. We were carried there in the arms of our parents, the same dear souls who read us Bible stories and taught us to sing “Jesus Loves Me This I Know.” They folded our hands at every meal to show us how to receive our food with thanks and by the bedtime prayers they taught us, we fell asleep knowing that our Lord Jesus was guarding our body and soul through the long, dark night. Of course, our parents weren’t alone. They enlisted the help of their parents, and pastor, and Sunday School, Lutheran Elementary and High School teachers and youth group leaders – a long line of believers who invested themselves in our spiritual well-being. These are people who took the time to point out our sin and its consequences, not to shame us into better behavior, but to lead us to Jesus so that we might thrive in the peace of the forgiveness he earned for us with his own blood. Talk about a legacy! We will enjoy forever the gift that these people, our forefathers in Christ have passed on to us. Wouldn’t today be a good time to thank those people, the ones still with us, of course. And as for those who’ve gone to be with Jesus ahead of us, how happy we can be to know that heaven’s eternal day will give us plenty of time to say “thank you” when we are together at long last.

But of course, our deepest debt of gratitude is to the One who gave himself for us. I’m thinking we’ll soon discover that eternity’s too short to utter all his praise – all the more reason for us to get a head start, to praise his name now, not simply in our hymns and prayers, but with our whole life. What better way to spend our time and energy, than to invest ourselves in the spiritual well-being of others? Think about it! What better way is there to ensure that Jesus receives more praise than to share his gospel with more people? The psalmist urges us to think this way. He would have us look Forward in Faith to the opportunities we have to share the good news of the Savior with our kids and grandkids, always hopeful for our children in Christ.

As Asaph gives thought to the spiritual truths passed on to him by his forefathers, he realizes he has an important role to play in God's building plans. He writes: **"We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done."** (Psalm 78:4). Notice that the psalmist speaks of "their children" – that is the children of our spiritual forefathers – believers who had the big picture in mind when they entrusted the gospel to our care. They were confident that the gospel seed they sowed among us would bear them generations of spiritual descendants, not all of whom would be in their bloodline but all of whom would make up their family in Christ. I'm thinking of people like those who founded this congregation and those who made sure we had a building in which to worship and a school for our children to attend. In many cases, our names were not known to these saints, but they were thinking of us just the same. Though we were not yet born, they made sacrifices and cared for us as if we were their children, because in a very real sense, we are their children in Christ. And now, it's our turn to make sure that all that these people have done doesn't end with us. It's our turn to make sure that the gospel gift we have received is not hidden from the next generation and those to come after that.

The gospel is hidden when it is no longer front and center in our lives. It is hidden when we devote ourselves to other priorities. If someone were to ask your children or grandchildren what they believe is really important to you, what would they say? Based on the way you spend your time and energy, based on what you say and do, what would those close to you conclude about your priorities? When you are no longer here on earth, what will your children say is the greatest thing they've learned from you? What will your legacy be?

From time to time I see a bumper sticker or sign that says: "We're spending our kids' inheritance." Obviously the message is meant to be humorous. But sometimes I wonder if it's offered up as a bit of an apology. No apology is ever necessary when it comes to spending our children's' spiritual inheritance—not when you understand this to mean that you are busy enjoying the very gospel you are trying to share with your family. When those close to you see that having God's forgiveness earned by Christ is the most important thing in your life, it will make a lasting impression on them. When they watch as you live confident that God is making all things serve your good thanks to Jesus, it will give them so much to think about. When they watch you face death unafraid of where you are going, it will comfort those who love you and give them reason to rejoice in the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord whose sacrifice on the cross opened heaven's door to sinners to you and me and all sinners.

I know this from experience. I told you about my Grandpa Grob and his hard life, a life made more difficult by the fact that he made no time for Christ. In fact, for much of his adult life, grandpa considered himself an atheist. I saw the pain and concern this caused my mother as she lived with the reality that her father might perish in hell. I watched as she and my dad worked to share Christ with grandpa every chance they got, even making missionaries of my sister and me by having us sit next to grandpa every Sunday afternoon to retell what we had heard just hours earlier in Sunday school. Year after year this went on with no change that we could see. But then came a major stroke that sent grandpa to the hospital. My parents asked our pastor, Pastor Stensberg to visit grandpa. The gospel worked its miracle of faith. Grandpa lived seven days, seven days filled with peace and joy and gratitude on grandpa's part and ours too.

So as it turns out, a pocket watch seems like a pretty fitting legacy from a man whose life taught me that time is of the essence. Now is the time for you and me to look forward in faith, doing everything we can to pass along all that our God has so graciously given us, hopeful that it will bring eternal blessings to our children and their children and to generations yet unborn. It will, it must, for Jesus' sake. Amen.