

My daughter is not shy. I think you all know that by now. We often joke that she has never met a stranger. If there is a new person to meet, she will be the first to meet them. To become their friend. To inundate them with conversation.

The funny thing is that she wasn't always like that. When she was a toddler, she could be very, very shy. Especially around men, for some reason. We actually asked the elders of my former congregation to intentionally interact with her, even when she was acting shy. In the hopes that they might make her less skittish. I think it worked a little too well.

But during those shy years, whenever she would meet new people or be in a new situation, she would run to me or Stefani for security. Race behind us and hide behind our legs, peering out from around them. Which, as a father, is not a bad feeling. I want my daughter to feel safe around me. I want her to always know she can run to me for help.

But at the same time, I didn't want her hiding behind my legs all the time. Because at some point I wanted her to realize that she didn't have to. That she could trust me and understand that she didn't need to hide behind my legs in order for me to protect her. I was always watching out for her. She didn't need to hide behind me, because I would gladly step in front of her. No matter the cost. No matter the danger.

I think that's the lesson that St Paul was trying to teach to the Ephesian elders in our reading from Acts this morning. Paul is preaching a farewell sermon to them. Which is already an unusual sermon to be preaching. But this is even more so. Because it's not just farewell until the next time we see each other. It's farewell... forever. At least in this earthly life.

The Holy Spirit has told Paul he will never visit the Ephesians again. And the Ephesians were special to Paul. Paul bounced from city to city throughout his missionary journeys. He rarely stayed more than a few weeks in each place.

But when he gets to Ephesus, he settles down and spends three years ministering to the people there. He has worked longer and harder with the Ephesians than any other congregation. This congregation grew from the ground up under Paul's care. They don't know what it means to be a church without Paul's leadership.

And so he tells them. He tells them how to exist as a congregation without him physical there anymore. But what he says to them is kind of an odd combination of topics.

He talks about the persecution he suffered while ministering to them. Humility and tears and trials because of the plots of the Jews. He talks to them about the dangers they are going to face after he leaves. Fierce wolves who will arise among them, not sparing the flock. Men who speak twisted things, to draw the disciples after them.

But he also tells them about the purpose of his ministry there. Declaring to them anything that was profitable. Teaching them, both in public and from house to house. Testifying of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and of the good news of the grace of God.

And he tells them of their purpose in ministry. For they do have a purpose still, even after he's gone. They are commended to God and the word of his grace, to be built up and given an inheritance among the sanctified. And so they should covet no one's silver or gold or apparel. Instead, they should minister not only to their own necessities, but to those who are with them. Working hard to help the weak and remembering always the words of Jesus, that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

It's an interesting mix of topics. Persecution and evangelism. Suffering and compassion. At first glance, they don't seem to have much to do with each other. But, in Paul's mind, they have everything to do with each other.

Because Paul knows that it's human nature to run and hide in the face of danger. Like a toddler, hiding behind the legs of her father when she's afraid, the church runs and hides behind her walls when she's afraid. She runs and hides within herself. Then peeks around the corner and sees if the danger has passed.

It's an understandable reaction. If someone threw a rock at you right now, you'd protect yourself. You'd shield your face. You'd duck out of the way. You'd might even run away. And no one would blame you. They'd be doing the same thing. Hiding from danger just makes sense to us.

And so we do the same when the world throws rocks at us. Whether it's little things like restricting when and where we worship. Calling us names like bigots and backwards and fools. Or whether its the martyrdom of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East or the imprisonment of pastors in southeast Asia.

The world threatens us and all we want to do is hide. Run behind the legs of our Lord and say, "Make them go away. I'm small and scared and I just want them gone."

But to that, our Lord says, "You don't need to run behind me. I've already stood in front of you. I've already endured everything the world throws at you. I've heard their insults. I've endured their perverted justice. And I've suffered their cruel executions.

But more than that, he not only empathizes with us. Understands our fear and frustration. But he's also protected us as well. He's already faced the worst enemies we could ever face: sin, death, and the power of the devil. He has faced them. He has defeated them.

In that famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," Martin Luther describes Jesus as our champion. A champion is someone who fights in the place of someone else. Jesus is the one who fights in our place. The one who suffers on our behalf so that we might not fear the punishment of the world. As Hebrews says: "*The Lord is my helper, I will not fear. What can man do to me?*"

And Paul knows what it means to incite fear in someone's heart. He's not only been persecuted as a Christian, but he spent quite a bit of time doing the persecution of Christians. And yet that ended on the road to Damascus. That ended when Jesus himself stood before Paul. That ended when Jesus himself ask Paul, "Why do you persecute me?"

Not, why do persecute my church? Paul couldn't hurt Christ's church. He could do nothing to them. Because Christ had already stood in front of them. No, Paul wasn't persecuting the church. He was persecuting Jesus. He was beating his fists against the risen Lord. He was fighting against God himself.

And so Jesus asks him, "Why do you persecute me? I have stood in front of my people as their champion. You can't hurt them. You can't hurt me. So why do you bother trying?"

Paul learned that day what it means to have Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. And it transformed his life. Gave him the strength. And confidence. And fearlessness in the face of all the world throws at us.

And so Paul encourages us in this passage: Don't let the persecution of the world stop you from sharing the Gospel. Don't let the dangers within and without stop you from caring for the weak. You are the baptized children of God. You have nothing to fear.

Not from the devil. Not from the world. Not even from your own sinfulness. Because you were obtained with Christ's own blood. You are sustained by Christ's own body and blood. You are commended to God and the Word of His grace. Entrusted into the care of our Lord.

You don't need to hide behind him. He's already standing in front of you. A pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. Leading us to the Promised Land.

And so who cares if they hate us. I will still love them. While I was still an enemy of God, my Lord saved me. While they are still enemies of the Church, I will do everything in my power to save them. Because despite all the blessings that I have received from my Lord Jesus, it is still more blessed to give than to receive.

My daughter isn't a toddler anymore. And every day, I watch her step out more and more from behind my legs without fear because she knows her dad is always protecting her. And I am confident that the Holy Spirit is here in this place, guiding and protecting us as we step out in faith to reach a world that needs to know the good news of God's grace. Amen.