

FOUR WHEEL DRIVE

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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: I Peter 5:6-11

SCRIPTURE

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

SERMON

There is an old story about a college professor that has been told and retold. In fact, it has been retold so often that you can find an entry about it on Snopes.com, a website devoted to determining the truth of rumors and urban legends. The version I heard was of a calculus professor who was decent and fair, generally liked by his students, but also had a reputation of being tough. The story goes that at the end of one semester, four of his students walked into his class late for the final exam, just a few minutes before the allotted time was up. Various reasons have been given for why they were late. One version says they had been out partying the night before. The one I heard was that they were not prepared and wanted more time to study. Anyway, they explained to the professor that they were on their way to the exam when they had a flat tire. They went to change it only to discover the spare was flat as well. So, they were very sorry, but it was not their fault. Could they possibly take the exam tomorrow?

The professor was rather skeptical, but finally agreed. If they came back the next day, he would have a make-up final prepared for them. When they came back, the professor put them in four different rooms, with the test waiting for them. The first page had one problem worth five points, that was lengthy but not all that difficult to solve. The four students thought they were home free, until they went on to the next page. There they found only one question worth 95 points. The question was this: Which tire on the car was flat? Since they had not discussed this ahead of time, their answers differed, and so they flunked their final.

This story still has some punch to it today, but in another 10 to 15 years there could be young drivers who would not get it. Automotive experts are saying that it will not be too much longer before cars will not have spare tires. In fact, roughly 13 percent of new cars sold today, do not have spares, and that percentage is on the rise. Why no spare? Well, to save money, of course, why else? It reduces the vehicle weight, along with one less thing you need to make space for in smaller fuel efficient cars. Instead cars will have tire repair kits with sealant and plug in compressors, or better yet, they will have run-flat tires. These are tires designed so that after a puncture and loss of air, they can still perform well enough so that drivers can keep going and get somewhere to get it fixed. This can be especially helpful if the flat occurs in an inconvenient or dangerous location. Now, run-flat tires are only a temporary solution. They probably are only good for about 50 miles max, and not at high speeds. But a carload of college students could not use a flat tire as an excuse for being late to a final exam.

Our text for this morning has to do with a time when the church felt like it had completely broken down with four flat tires and was stuck beside the road. Traditionally, this letter is attributed to the Apostle Peter, but we do not know for certain who actually did write it. Based on various technical details I won't go into, some Biblical scholars believe it was written around 80 to 85 AD, or about 50 years after Jesus had been crucified,

risen and returned to heaven. By this time, many of the original disciples and eye witnesses to all that Jesus had done were elderly and starting to die off. Furthermore, these original witnesses were scattered across the Roman Empire, so the original unity and enthusiasm was dwindling. On top of this, at around 81 AD, the Roman Emperor Domitian issued orders for widespread persecution of Christians across the entire empire. Prior to this, persecution was localized. Christians might have been arrested and harassed in one region, but were largely ignored in other areas. But now Christians were suffering in all parts of the Roman Empire, and as a result many were discouraged, wondering if it was all worth it. They felt like everything had ground to a halt and nothing was moving.

So the writer of this letter is trying to encourage those in the young church, urging them to be faithful, reminding them of the hope that is theirs through the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The bulk of the letter is an argument that while no one wants suffering, God can use the hardships and challenges we face to produce good things. The verses we read come at almost the end of the letter as the writer is trying to wrap everything up. The readers are urged to be humble, allowing God to work within their lives. They are to remain calm, let go of all anxiety, because God cares a great deal about them. Then at the end of our text the writer promises four things that God will do for us; four things that will get things moving again; four wheels, if you will, to get the church rolling once more. Do not be discouraged, we are told. God is still at work. Things are not broken down, but we are rolling with four-wheel drive. Verse 10 reads, “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace... will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” I would like us to look at each of those words... *restore*, *support*, *strengthen* and *establish*... these four things that God will do for us, this four-wheel drive, and see what this means for us today.

The first word, *restore*, is what made me think about wheels and tires in the first place. In the original Greek it is an interesting word that has a number of meanings. The NRSV says “restore” but it can mean to repair or mend. In the 4th chapter of Matthew, we find the story of Jesus calling the first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John. They were all fishermen in the Sea of Galilee and when Jesus finds them they are sitting on the shore mending their nets. This is the same word, restore or mend. It implies not a quick, temporary fix, but a permanent repair so that full function is restored. This is not inflating a tire to get you to the tire shop. This is the fix the tire shop will make, or better yet, this is buying a whole new set of tires that are safe and reliable.

But there is more to this word. It also means to make perfect, as in practiced, refined, rehearsed, trained, or made to be suitable. In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the religious leaders are outraged because children are singing, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” They want Jesus to shut them up. But Jesus replies that from the mouths of babies comes “perfect” praise. This is the same word as restore in our text. From young, inexperienced voices, comes praise that has been made perfect as if it has been practiced over and over for many years.

The writer of 1st Peter is telling us that God is at work within us to restore us, to repair any flaw within us, to make us whole and functional, to polish and refine us, to make us more than suitable. That is the first wheel of our four-wheel drive.

God will *restore* us, but then it says God will *support* us. In some translations this word is given as strengthen, but it means to strengthen, not so much in terms of power or energy, but in terms of reinforcing or building up. A common blessing or prayer found in other letters in the New Testament, is along the lines of “May God strengthen your heart.” It uses this same term. In other words, may God give you courage, reinforcing and building up your heart.

But again, there are other shades of meaning. It means being strong in the sense of making up your mind and not wavering in any way, not hesitating, not second guessing yourself. There is a pivotal point in the 9th chapter of the Gospel of Luke where it says Jesus “set his face towards Jerusalem.” In the old King James Version it says he “fixed his face towards Jerusalem.” The word that is translated as set or fixed is this same word for support. Jesus had reinforced his decision to go to Jerusalem, knowing it would mean the cross, but even so he did not hesitate or waver.

God is at work to restore us, but also to support us, to reinforce our inner resolve, to make sure that we do not hesitate or doubt, but move forward with courage and confidence. That is the second wheel of our four-wheel drive.

God will *restore* us and *support* us, but God will also *strengthen* us. Now the Greek word used here is *stheneos* and there is an English word “sthenia” derived from this term. I had never heard of this word until Judy used it this week, scoring over 90 points against me in our online Scrabble game. This time it means strength in terms of force and energy. Actually it is often used in medical terminology where they might refer to an acute sthenic fever or infection meaning a disease that is strong and resistant to normal medical treatment.

The interesting thing about this word is that this verse in 1st Peter is the only place it shows up in the New Testament, and it is not very common in other Greek writings. However, if you put a negative prefix on *stheneos* you come up with a very common word found throughout the New Testament. By looking at its opposite we can get a very clear understanding of what *stheneos* really means. We find this opposite in Matthew 27, the story of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus wants the disciples to stay awake and pray with him, but they keep falling asleep. He says the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. That term is the negative of *stheneos*. It refers to being weak, or sick, feeble, crippled, or lacking in the ability to function. So this word for strength is the opposite of all those ideas.

God is at work to restore us, to support us, but God is also going to strengthen us. God will empower us with the energy we need. The spirit will be willing but we will also have the health, power and ability to do what needs to be done. That is the third wheel, the power wheel of our four-wheel drive.

God will *restore*, *support* and *strengthen* us, but God will also *establish* us. This word that is translated as “establish” is found in a well-known parable of Jesus. You probably sang about it when you were in Sunday School. Do you remember “The Wise Man Built His House Upon the Rock” and the motions that went with it? Jesus contrasted someone who builds their house on shifting sand versus on a solid rock. He then says, “The rain fell, the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock.” That word translated as “founded” is our word “establish.” It is a construction term meaning making sure you have a solid base to build on. It means holding fast, standing firm, remaining solid, not moving, not giving way or giving in.

God has not given up on us. God will establish us, making sure all of our efforts are grounded on something solid and firm. Nothing this world can throw against us can possibly shake us. We are firmly grounded on the rock, and nothing will change that.

So, those are the four wheels that drive us forward over any kind of terrain through any kind of weather conditions. We are *restored*, *supported*, *strengthened* and *established* forever. This was a great encouragement to those followers of Christ back in the early days of the church. In the face of loss, persecution and hardship they were encouraged to hold on. God was at work within them and in spite of the difficult conditions they were moving forward.

These four wheels continue to drive us today. We did two things this morning that proves this. First we welcomed new members into our congregation. God had not given up on us. God continues to support and strengthen us by bringing in brothers and sisters in Christ. We are better and healthier because these individuals believe God is leading them to be a part of what God is doing through us here in Marion.

The second thing we did was remember and honor those who have been a part of this congregation for decades. If you talk to Mary Mann, Katie Bock, or Don Stamy (and I hope you do) they will tell you that we are not the same church we were back in the '40s when as teenagers they were confirmed here in this room. Many things have changed. We have had and will continue to have our share of struggles and challenges. But God has continued to restore, support, strengthen and establish us down through the years.

What is true for us as the Body of Christ, what is true for us as the congregation of First Presbyterian church, is also true for us as individuals. It is so easy to feel like everything has ground to a standstill with four flat tires. But God is not done with you. God is still at work within you. God wants to restore you, to make you whole and complete. God wants to give you the support you need, to strengthen your heart. God wants to give you the power and energy you need to move forward. God wants to establish you so that you are grounded firmly on the solid rock of God's unchanging love.

I do not know what the terrain is like up ahead. Based on where we have been I think we might assume that there will be ups and downs. There may well be places where we will need to slow down and proceed with caution. But we are in a four-wheel drive church. God has taken us safely through the challenge of the past. God is our strength, our hope and our peace in the future. Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.