

# We Have Put Our Hope In The Living God

Sermon on 1 Timothy 4:9-16

[Vicar Assignment Service, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, May 23, 2006]

*James P. Tiefel*

Though this sermon is addressed specifically to men entering their vicarship, the principles it draws from the pastoral letter to Timothy apply also to men already serving in the pastoral ministry.

Who can tell what brought you to this place on this night. I know you're here because you have to be here; you can't be a pastor in the Wisconsin Synod unless you serve as a vicar first. But I'm talking now about the deeper reasons. I'm talking about what brought you to this school two years ago. What made you decide once upon a time that you wanted to study to be a pastor?

It has to be more than that being a pastor was the family business. It is that for some of you, but there has to be more. It has to be more than that some pastor made a good impression on you at some point in your life and you wanted to be like him. It has to be more than that following your MLC classmates to the seminary was easier than going out and getting a real job.

There are no Jeremiahs or John the Baptizers here. None of you were specifically proclaimed from birth to be destined for the parsonage. None of you came away from your baptism with a miniature stole draped around your neck, and no one called your white baptismal robe an alb. Something happened along the way that brought you to this place on this night. Who can tell what it was? Maybe it happened on an Easter Sunday in the fourth grade. Maybe it was something the pastor said in his sermon or maybe it was singing, "I know that my Redeemer lives." And all at once it hit you—I mean like suddenly—that Jesus was really different from the gods you were learning about in Bible history and social studies. All the other gods were statues, but Jesus was alive. Maybe it was a mission festival at your home church or a missionary talk at your high school. And all at once it dawned on you—I mean, it really struck you—that Jesus came to this earth not just for your family and friends and the people in your church and your town—he came to earth for everybody. Maybe it was in some college class or maybe it didn't happen until you came to the seminary, but someplace you glommed onto the reality that God gives what Jesus gained through the means of grace, that God forgives sins through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. I don't know your circumstances or your personal history all that well, but it's pretty obvious that someplace along the line of your life the Holy Spirit worked on you so that you are now ready to confess and articulate a very basic truth: *We have put our hope in the living God who is the Savior of all people and especially of those who believe.* If you are here tonight for the right reason—and I'm very sure you are—then here is what brought you to this place on this night: you believe that through the gospel the living Christ offers eternal life to all people. You believe that basic truth with all your heart and you want to speak that basic truth as a pastor. And that's what brought you to this place on this night.

Here's another basic truth: "You always dance with the girl that brought you." And so I suggest to you tonight that this basic truth, this faithful saying that brought you to your vicar year will also take you through your vicar year. And if it does, it will have its way with you during the coming year just as it had its way with you in the years gone by. And then you will proclaim this truth boldly, you will model this truth carefully, and you will believe this truth sincerely.

"This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe." You know these words; you know them better now than you did a year ago because you studied them in your Pastoral Epistles course last semester. You know that Timothy was in Ephesus when he received Paul's letter. You probably recognized that you have a lot in common with Timothy. Timothy wasn't a pastor in the normal sense of the term. Paul instructed him to appoint overseers, but not to be an overseer in Ephesus. Timothy was to correct false teachers but he wasn't going to stick around and see the fruits of his labors. He had other places to go and other people to serve. A congregation didn't call Timothy; Paul appointed Timothy as his representative while Paul went to Macedonia. When Timothy spoke, everyone knew there was another authority standing behind him. You're like Timothy in

other ways, too. You're all young and you're all pretty timid. I know that some of you weren't all that timid in class, but you'll get plenty timid when you face your first hardcore delinquent or when an angry ELCA visitor challenges your "unloving" communion practice.

And so, when St. Paul speaks to Timothy, he's also speaking to you. Just as he took Timothy back to this basic truth, he takes you there tonight. He reminds you of the essence of the Christian faith. He focuses your attention on the reality that your God is alive, that he is "eternal, immortal, invisible." No silver statue here; no dead idol. "You belong to God's household," Paul wrote to Timothy, "the church of the living God." Amazing, isn't it, considering that this God also died. But not so amazing when you know that he died by choice and on purpose. That he died because he was determined to carry on his back the sins of the world so that that his Father would have cause to declare the world free of sin. "We have put our hope in the living God who is the Savior of all people." There's the basic truth. Say this basic truth another way: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

"Labor and strive" for this, Paul said to Timothy and Paul says to you. "Command and teach" this, Paul said to Timothy and Paul says to you. "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young," Paul said to Timothy and Paul says to you. "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you." Paul says that to you, too. Recognize your inexperience, know your place, don't take yourself too seriously, but when it comes time to announce and proclaim that the living God is the Savior of all people, you don't back down to anyone. Whether you're grizzled and gray or green as grass, the reality remains that Jesus lived and died and lived again to rescue the world from death. The fact that you're not ordained doesn't change the other fact that God ordained his Son to offer his life as the atoning sacrifice for sin. Not wearing a fancy stole doesn't change the magnificence of God's love in Christ!

Focus on St. Paul's basic truth and go and be what you have been called to be—a vicar. "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture"—because that's the tool the Spirit uses Sunday after Sunday to turn listless and lazy hearts into beating and believing hearts. "Devote yourself to preaching"—not just to announcing like a herald, but to speaking like a friend and a father. Take to the pulpit and comfort and counsel and encourage and embrace. "Devote yourself to teaching"—catechize, organize, summarize—work to convince questioning minds as the Spirit works to convince doubting hearts.

Go have fun with the couples' club, take the teens camping, play dodge ball with the kids. Go find a wife if you need one. If you already have a wife, go have a baby. The members will just love it; it'll be the talk of the parish. But the members will love it more if they see in you a young man whose "speech and life and love and faith and purity" demonstrate the love of Jesus. Let them hear about Jesus' love in your words and then let them see Jesus' love in your life. Command them with your dedication, preach to them with your smile; teach them with your example. Congregations remember their vicars. Ah, yes. Vicar Such and So. Wonderful mind. What an athlete. Really friendly. Great musician... Oh, ya, we remember that vicar. We could see Jesus in him.

Timothy didn't have an easy task in Ephesus. Satan was tearing the congregation apart with false teaching. The ministry was disorganized and disheveled. Paul knew the trouble Timothy would have and so he took him back to the basics: *We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.* At least for next year, you have it easy compared to Timothy. But the stakes are no lower where you're going than they were in Ephesus. Satan works in vicars' towns, too, "prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." He's leading husbands and wives out of love, he's luring young adults to luxuries and alternate lifestyles, he's devouring teens with drugs and alcohol, he's putting doubts even into the hearts of little kids. "Watch your life and doctrine closely," Paul told Timothy and Paul tells you. For the sake of people let everything you do and say point to him who forgives peoples' sins every day and removes peoples' guilt every day and every day empowers and sustains the changes people make in their lives.

And one more thing: Satan works in vicars' towns and Satan works in vicars' hearts, too. I know what you're thinking tonight: Can I preach OK, can I teach OK, can I meet people, can I make decisions, can I go

into an intensive care unit, can I make a tough evangelism call? Think about this: Can I stand up against Satan? He wants you. He wants to bring you down. He wants to embarrass your bishop. He wants to make your seminary look bad. He wants you to lead people astray. And what he really wants is to destroy your faith. What a trophy—to drag a vicar into the hell of unbelief. Don't be so scared about being a vicar. If you're going to be scared about something, be scared to death of the devil. And when you see that satanic vision leaning over your bed at night or your desk in the morning, then throw the old ink pot at him and shout at him: I don't have time for you, Satan. *I have put my hope in the living God who is the Savior of all people and especially of those who believe.* And if he troubles you again, take yourself to the font and believe that "nothing can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus your Lord." And if he troubles you again, take yourself to the table and believe that in the true body and blood of Jesus you have the forgiveness of all your sins. And if he troubles you again take yourself to the book and believe what Jesus says to you: "My son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven." And if you "watch your life and doctrine closely," and if you "persevere in them," Paul said to Timothy and Paul says to you, "you will save both yourself and your hearers."

So simple. So basic. So true. Through the gospel the living Christ gives eternal life to all people. Through the working of the Holy Spirit this basic truth brought you to this place and this night. Through the same Spirit this truth will take you from this place to another place. Through the very same Spirit it will bring you back to this place in two years, and then it will go with you to another place and, God willing, to more places. And finally, it will carry you to a final place, a resting place, where you will see the living Christ face to face and hear the voices of the multitudes he saved. My dear young friends, may God grant this for Jesus' sake.

Amen.