

Advent **Part Five**

Philemon 4-7

Faith (in the Lord Jesus)

- *Hebrews 11:1*

Love (in all the saints)

- *John 13:34-35; Colossians 1:3-8*

Active (in sharing your faith)

- *John 15:8*

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West Valley Church
December 28, 2025
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Advent: Hope of All The Earth¹

Part Five: In the In-Between

Did any of you read comic books when you were a kid? I did – mostly Superman, Batman, and the Archies. Remember those? Of all comic book characters, Superman is the most popular (he's been around since 1938), followed closely by Batman (1939), and then Spiderman (1962). In the remaining top ten are others like Wonder Woman, Captain America, The X-Men, Ironman, and the Flash.

But not all comic book characters have been as successful. Here are a few that didn't make the cut:

In 1940, A character named Black Spider made his debut (long before Spiderman). But Black Spider had no superpowers, just a black mask and a bunch of spiders. Black Spider would bring the bad guys to his hidden cave on the outskirts of town and introduce them to his eight-legged friends. Apparently, all bad guys are afraid of bugs. He also kept a few extra "trained spiders" in a tube on his belt – just in case he needed to creep out the crooks when he was out and about town. That comic book didn't last very long.

Then in 1943 came the "Music Master." The Music Master was mild mannered John Wallace who was a classical violinist, who learned the "ancient secrets" that gave him one of the strangest superpowers in the history of comics. As the Music Master, he was able to pull musical notes out of the air – they looked just like notes on sheet music, only much bigger – he used them as weapons and tools. He could also ride the notes, allowing him to fly. He also had a sidekick by the name of "Downbeat." They would scale walls with scales and flatten bad guys with flats. But within a year their popularity failed.

In 1962, the same year that gave us Spiderman, the genius comic book writers also came up with a teenaged superhero called "Matter Eating Lad." The story was set in the 30th century. He came from the planet Bismoll (as in Pepto). All the people from that planet have the ability to eat anything. Somehow this young lad managed to eat his way across the cosmos to planet earth where he decided to use his appetite to fight for truth and justice. So he would chow down on ray guns and tunnel his way out of caves mouth first. Matter Eating Lad's career as a comic book lasted less than a year.

Those really were comic book characters, and they didn't last for good reason. Some stories are just not worth telling.

¹ Resources include: David Glimour, *Hope of all the Earth*, The Foundry, 2025
Hope of all the Earth Pastor's resource, The Foundry, 2025

Last week we celebrated a story that has been told for nearly 2000 years: the beginning of the story of Jesus Christ. Now that's a story worth remembering. That's a story worth telling.

We are here today in between the holidays, and it's a good day to remind ourselves that most of our lives are spent in the in-between times – in between times of real celebration and victory and sorrow and loss. How do we live our lives in the in-between times? It's easy to praise God in the great times, and we are driven to trust in the challenging times. But what about the in-between times? We can still tell the story and grow in our faith, because the Hope of All the Earth has arrived into this world on that first Christmas. You and I have a story to tell *every* day, my friends. And we tell it with our lives.

If you are a Christian, it means that your life has been changed by this story: that God himself, the creator of everything, came to earth in the person of Jesus his Son the Christ, who suffered, died on a cross, then rose from the dead and lives in *your* heart. He did all that – he moved heaven and earth and below the earth – to rescue you. *That* is a great story! And that's the story we have to tell in all the in-between times – where life is lived, and most of our growth in faith takes place. How do you continue to thrive and grow in the everyday in-between times? By telling your story. This point is made for us in a small little letter in the back half of the New Testament, called Philemon. It's so small it doesn't even have chapters – only verses. I'd like for us to see verses 4-7. In those few verses are some powerful words that challenge us to live out and tell others our great story. You might say that this is the secret to “witnessing” – that's a word that is used to describe sharing your faith with other people. This is what it says:

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. (Philemon 4-7, niv)

You might wonder what in the world that has to do with witnessing, and I would tell you it has everything to do with it. Paul is saying that he has a reason to be thankful for his friend Philemon whenever he thinks of him, and it's because of what he's heard about him from people. Here's what Philemon was known for (and what we want to be known for, too):

First is...

Faith (in the Lord Jesus).

Not just any faith – faith in Jesus. What does this have to do with telling our story? This speaks louder than anything you can say. People watch our lives more than they listen to our words.

This faith that we have in Jesus is a powerful, life-changing thing. It is the ability to trust Jesus in any situation we are in – whether it is good or bad, easy or difficult, calm or crisis – because we know that he will not only get us through it, but will somehow use it for our good.

In the Bible, in Hebrews chapter eleven verse one it says:

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1, niv)

What is it we hope for? What can't we see? It means that we know that God is with us and that God will give us what we need in any and all situations. It means we trust that God is at work for our good and for the good of others when we love and trust him. This is how we tell our story – by living in such a way that we trust him no matter what.

During the years that our youngest son, Brenden, was between one and four years old, he was stricken by something that caused him to be diagnosed as “failure to thrive.” There were multiple times that he was so weak that he almost died. We didn't know why this was happening, and to this day we don't know for sure. The specialists were beginning to zero in on a diagnosis, when, thankfully, the Lord healed him and it went away. There were many, many miracles that took place during those nearly three years, and I don't have time to tell you the entire story. But I will tell you that throughout those years we were at a loss. We were scared, exhausted, and just trying to hold the family together. We have two older boys – one is two years older than Brenden and one is four years older – and we tried to help them understand that their brother was sick, but also try not to alarm them to how bad it actually was. We spent thousands of dollars and weeks upon weeks going to specialists from Boise to Doernbecher's Children's Hospital in Portland to Denver Children's Hospital. Shelly and I were nearly at the end of every rope we had during that time. But never once did we lose our faith in God. We trusted him. We knew there was a very real possibility that our son would not survive this life. At times we were angry with God, and many times we questioned what was happening and why God wasn't doing what we wanted him to do. But we never stopped trusting him.

At that time there was a praise and worship song that was called, “There is none like you.” Some of the lyrics are, “There is none like you. No one else can touch my heart like you do. I can search for all eternity long and find, there is none like you.” Then it says, “Your mercy flows like a river so wide, and healing comes from your hand. Suffering children are safe in your arms. There is none like you.” I would break down crying every time I heard it, because I knew it was true.

During that time we had a next-door neighbor who wasn't a Christian – in fact, he would state clearly that he was an atheist. I don't know if he had any background in church, but he was adamant that he wanted nothing to do with God. But still, we befriended him and he and I would talk over the back fence. I was honest with him about our son's situation, and one day as we were talking, he asked me: how can you even get through this? He had a family himself, and he said it would destroy him to see his son suffering the way ours was. I was able to be honest with him. I

told him we didn't know what the outcome was going to be, and we knew there was a very real possibility he wouldn't survive. But it was our job to fight for him and to pursue every avenue available to us. But ultimately, we knew that God loved our son even more than we did, and that whatever the outcome, he would be safe in the arms of Jesus.

The neighbor said, "If you can have faith in Jesus in a time like this, maybe there is something to it."

Now, I don't know what happened to my neighbor because he moved not too long after that. But the faith we are talking about is not a faith that says, "I don't have to worry because everything will have a happy ending," or "my baby will definitely be healed in this life" or "the money I need will fall from the sky." No, ours is a faith that hopes for and is certain of *the character of Christ*: that he loves me without fail, and even if there is no happy ending, I will trust – I am certain – of his character and nature, which is love. And that therefore means he will work it out for our best, even if there's no healing or money. It's a faith like Job in the Bible who said:

"Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." (Job 13:15)

Having faith in Jesus in all situations is a story that others will hear loud and clear, because they will say, "If you can trust God in the midst of that – maybe I can trust him too."

In addition, the season of Advent that we've just come through is not only a celebration of Jesus' birth, but of much more than that. It is a reminder that one day Christ will come again to set all things right. I want to quote a reading from the Advent daily reading that our church just finished going through together. This is part of the reading for Christmas day. It says that "Christmas day is a wonderful day of celebration, of joy, of love, and of life. But we can live in sure and certain confidence that it is only a foretaste of what lies ahead for God's people.

As CS Lewis put it, when we compare Christmas Day to that day, it is only 'the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.' That reality also brings incomparable hope to those for whom Christmas Day may be tinged with sorrow, with pain, with grief – because we are pressing on to a day when every tear will be wiped away by the hands of God himself; when every wound will be utterly and perfectly healed; when everything sad and broken and spoiled is finally restored and redeemed, once and for all."²

In the in between times, others will hear and believe your story as they see you trusting in the Lord Jesus for this life and his return.

You also tell the story by your...

Love (for all the saints).

² David Gilmour, *Hope of All the Earth* (The Foundry Publishing, Kansas City, 2025) page 107

This is the other significant way that we tell our story. I'm sure you've heard it said that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Our faith in the Lord Jesus is proven by how we love other people, and it starts with our love for one another in the church. And that's often easier said than done. Someone once said that loving people in heaven will be much easier than loving each other here on earth: "To live above with those we love – oh, won't that be glory! But to dwell below with those we know, well that's another story!"

And yet, Jesus said that our love for one another would be the litmus test for the believability of our story. Jesus told his disciples very plainly:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35, niv)

When people in a church genuinely love and care for each other, those outside the church take notice. When we take care of each other, support each other, when those who have resources give to help those who do not have resources, those outside the church take notice.

This doesn't mean that we pretend everything is great all the time, or that we have some kind of dysfunctional codependence on each other that dismisses faults or avoids conflict or puts our head in the sand instead of holding each other accountable. We double down and do the hard work of reconciling and working through issues for the sake of our love and unity. That's why it is so unhealthy when people in church would rather leave the church than deal with conflict, thinking that another church has greener pastures. The trouble is that the new church has humans in it, too.

Our reputation – what we're known for – is to be that we love each other and care about each other and we work together – even when there are difficult situations.

This story telling by the duo of faith and love is the same thing the Apostle Paul talks about in Colossians 1:3-8 –

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. (Colossians 1:3-8, niv)

That's what it means to be active in sharing your faith – and that's the third part of that passage we read about Philemon...

Active (in sharing your faith).

This is how we continue to grow in our faith in the in between times. Did you see in verse six that we are told the result of actively sharing your faith through your everyday trust in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints? Listen again:

“I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. (Here it is!) I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. (Philemon 4-6, niv)

This is how you will grow in your relationship to Christ – how you will gain a full understanding. That’s why sharing your story – which is backed up with faith in Jesus and love for others, gets you through the in between times.

The very first amendment to the Constitution in the Bill of Rights in our nation is what? Freedom of speech. It is foundational to a free society.

You've got the right to say anything you like.

But others don't have to listen! They're under no obligation to tune you in, and when they do, they can also tune you out anytime they want.

Your right to speak is guaranteed--but you must earn the right to be listened to. How do you do that? It depends solely on your integrity. Integrity is the prerequisite to acceptance.

If you expect to be paid attention to, back it up with your life. Let your walk correspond to your talk.

This is fundamental to telling the story in the in between times. There are many so-called Christians who listen too little, talk too much, and live lives that contradict what they say. Their "witness" betrays Christ – and alienates those to whom they speak.³

Let your reputation be that you have faith in the Lord Jesus and love for all the saints. This is what it means to be active in sharing your faith – letting your life reinforce what you say. In this, you will grow in your understanding of your faith in the in between times.

The Bible talks a great deal about how we are to “bear fruit,” or about how our relationship to God through Christ can be evident in our lives, like fruit is the evidence of what kind of tree it is.

You have a great story; please share it!

Jesus said in John 15:8 –

“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15:8, niv)

³ Adapted from Richard C. Halverson in *No Greater Power. Christian Reader, Vol. 25, no. 1*

This ought to be our goal in all times – the good times and the difficult times and in all times in between – this is what you and I want to be known for; that others will hear of our faith in the Lord Jesus and our love for all the saints. That we are active in sharing our faith and growing in all our understanding.

Prayer

Benediction:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(Romans 15:5-6, esv)