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Have you ever found yourself hanging on for dear life? Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you might have said those words: I'm just hanging on for dear life. It's unlikely that you've ever found yourself actually hanging on for dear life. Most of us have never found ourselves dangling with one hand from a cliff—something out of a James Bond movie. You probably haven't found yourself clinging to the top of a car, hanging on for dear life as it races through a city.

But in our lives there are moments or situations where we use that phrase meaningfully but metaphorically — we are hanging on for dear life. When we use the phrase in this metaphorical way, we aren't focused on the thing we are hanging onto—we aren't focused on the cliff or the branch or the car roof we are hanging onto. Rather when we use that phrase metaphorically we are focusing on the difficult situation we are in:

We're not sure if we can pay the rent this month – hanging on for dear life.
We're sick and feeling isolated and alone – we're hanging on for dear life.
We're feeling anxious or depressed – we're hanging on for dear life.
Our family is in trouble – we're hanging on for dear life.

When we are hanging on for dear life it means we are trying to endure a really hard situation. It means we just want to make it through. It means we are just hoping to find the resources and help and relief that we need. To see a better day.

Over the past number of months I think it's fair to say that many have been hanging on for dear life. Some of our neighbours, our family members, and perhaps we ourselves, have felt like the fear and disruption and isolation were going to knock us off our feet—that we weren't going to make it through this pandemic. Many have been hanging on for dear life, just hoping to make it safely through each wave of the pandemic—hoping to make it through all the turmoil each wave represents for our lives.

Of course there are also those who have been doing just fine in the pandemic; those who haven't been particularly anxious, or lonely, or discouraged. But even if we are in that position of having been comfortable, even if we've been feeling pretty secure, we probably know others who have been hanging on for dear life. We have known others who have been sick with Covid and struggling with breath and health. We have known others seemingly overwhelmed by anxiety. And it has been hard to ignore the fact that those in lower-income and racialized communities have suffered disproportionately from Covid—have suffered disproportionately both in terms of health and the economic fallout. So many have been hanging on for dear life.

As I offer these words this morning, perhaps you are wondering: Why this phrase? Why are we talking about what it means to hang on for dear life? Well, it certainly seems to fit our situation, doesn't it. But I can also start to answer this question by pointing out that we find similar language in our text for this morning from

Philippians chapter 2. In our text for today, Paul talks about holding fast and hanging on.

And just to take one further step back, I can tell you that I have chosen this particular text from Philippians chapter 2 because the motto of The Presbyterian College comes from this text. As the new Principal of the College, I have felt like I should understand the history and culture and identity of the college. And it seemed like a good way to do that is by exploring the college motto and the bible passage it comes from.

Now I have to warn you that we are actually going to deal with a little bit of confusion as we explore this today. The confusion lies in the fact that some English bibles translate that phrase in Philippians 2 verse 16, as “holding forth the word of life.” And other English bibles interpret the original Greek text as “holding fast to the word of life.” Paul writes to the Philippian Christians, either: “It is by your holding forth the word of life that I will be able to boast on the day of Christ.” Or he writes: “It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I will be able to boast on the day of Christ.” Some biblical interpreters think Paul might even mean both of these things at the same time—that he is playing with words. That he is trying to say: The word of life to which you hold fast is a word of life you feel compelled to share, to hold forth for others. That makes some sense, maybe he intends these two meanings at once.

In choosing its motto, the Presbyterian college went with the phrase “holding forth the word of life.” In the Latin it is: *Sermonem Vitae Praetendentes*. This has been the college motto for almost 150 years. You can find it in the wrought iron gates of the old Presbyterian College building on the campus of McGill University. It is a fine motto, we might want to say, for a College that was and is committed to speaking the Word of God—committed even to the importance of sermons – to holding forth the word of life.

So The Presbyterian College went with translation that says we are called to hold forth the word of life. That makes some sense within the grand narrative of the New Testament, doesn't it? It reflects the evangelistic spirit of the gospel. There is good news to share. We declare to others: Listen to the amazing things Jesus has to say. Listen to the word of hope offered in him. Let me tell you about the joy he brings to children and families and to our world. Through him you can shine like a star in the sky. It's a beautiful motto and vision – holding forth for others the beautiful new life that is ours in Christ.

But this morning I began this sermon by going in another direction, didn't I? We started out with the idea that sometimes we are hanging on for dear life. And that's actually the theme I want to continue with this morning.

Let me make this suggestion. We will let The Presbyterian College have as its motto, “Holding forth the word of life, “ from Philippians 2:16. And this morning I will propose that St. Giles take as its theme and motto on this Anniversary Sunday: “Holding fast to the word of life,” based on this same text from Philippians 2:16.

Let's us read again Paul's words to the Philippians:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. **It is by your holding fast to the word of life** that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

Now there is an awful lot going on in those few verses. But I think it is fair to take the phrase “holding fast to the word of life” as a kind of centre to this text.

We need to first of all understand what is this word of life to which we must hold fast. For Paul, the Word of life is embodied in the person of Jesus:

The Word of life is the one who came among us in humility.

The Word of life is the one who humbled himself to the point of death.

The Word of life is the one who was vindicated in resurrection life.

For Paul the word of life is this person Jesus, and it is the good news we find in him—that he is our life and our calling and our reconciliation and our new way of inhabiting the world.

And so Paul is saying to the women and men of the church in Philippi: If you are going to live out your salvation; if you want to know the power of God at work in their lives; if you are going to shine like stars in a world gone mad; if you want to find joy and gladness; if you are going to be a source of joy and gladness for others— All of these things can only happen as you hold fast to the Word of life — All of these things can only happen as you hold fast to the crucified, the risen, the ascended Jesus, and the kingdom embodied in him. Seeking him prayerfully; reading his story faithfully; gathering with his people regularly.

I began this morning with the phrase “holding on for dear life.” And perhaps Paul wouldn’t mind if we adapted his words, like this: We are to hang on to Jesus for dear life. We are to hang on for dear life to Jesus and the good news proclaimed in him.

As I have mentioned earlier, when we use that phrase in everyday life —I’m hanging on for dear life—we tend to be focussed on the challenging situation itself.

This situation is so difficult, and I just want to make it through the other side. I’m hanging on for dear life; just trying to keep it together; just mustering my resources to keep going.

But with Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we might say, it’s kind of the opposite. In Paul’s letter it isn’t necessarily the difficult circumstances that are placed at the forefront. For Paul, whatever the circumstance we are in; whatever is going on in our lives; whatever we are trying to figure out in terms of living well and wisely –

whatever our circumstances, we know who we are to hang onto. We know the message we are to hang onto.

Here at St. Giles Presbyterian church—you are a community that has rich history and a meaningful shared life today. As you come together on this anniversary Sunday, and as you share with one another as the Body of Christ, you each come with a unique set of preoccupations. There are challenges in your lives, some of which you may have shared with others, and some of which you carry very much alone. Some of you carry the distress of this pandemic. Others of you struggle in your family life. Others of you struggle with health concerns. The invitation I extend to you is that you hang on for dear life—that you hang on for dear life to the risen Jesus and his good news. Of course there are resources to support you and friends to accompany you and new strengths for you to discover in the face of your challenges. But in all of that—before and after and in the middle of it all – you are invited to hang on for dear life to the risen Jesus and his good news. To seek him and to reach out to him and in doing so to discover that he is your strength and your healing and your peace.

So there are these differences among you as a congregation, and each of you is invited to hang on to the risen Jesus in your unique life and situation. But there is among you something shared. In the same way that the Christians of Philippi shared a life together in Christ—in community and ministry—you also share such a life. In this congregation you are together working out our salvation with fear and trembling; you are together wanting to boast in each other's goodness and faithfulness; you are together those share in the gladness and joy of which Paul speaks; you are together as those who shine forth the love of Christ in a neighbourhood and a city and a world of grief and pain. And you will be this community, and this people—you can only be this people—as you together hang on to Jesus for dear life. Holding fast to the word of life.

It is a simple message for you really, here as you celebrate your anniversary, and as you anticipate your continued life together in the next year. Hold fast to the Word of life. Hold on for dear life to Jesus. He will be your strength, your joy, your song. He will be your wisdom and your faithfulness.

St. Giles Presbyterian church, hang on to Jesus for dear life.

*And now to the one God be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus. Now and always.
Amen.*