Sermon, June 9, 2024
"We Do Not Lose Heart"
Third Sunday after Pentecost,
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

"*Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries*" from the 1931 song, lyrics by Lew Brown.

But . . .

"If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?" — Erma Bombeck,

Or "*gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle*", or "we mourn and weep in this valley of tears" from the ancient Christian hymn, "Salve Regina" or as the Italian poet Dante put it in his Divine Comedy, *"Life is a " vale of tears" a period of trial and suffering, an unpleasant but necessary preparation for the afterlife where alone man could expect to enjoy happiness*

But then. . .

"Life is a vale of tears in which there are moments you just can't stop giggling".
Robert Breault

On the other hand . . .

"We live in a vale of tears...We can have all the dreams we like, but life is hard, implacable, sad."
Paulo Coelho

And yet . . .

"Beyond this vale of tears there is a life above. unmeasured by the flight of years; and all that life is love." — James Montgomery

So which is it in this point/counterpoint game of ping pong? Shall we let the psalmist have the last word?

"The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away" . Psalm 90:10

So I'm going to let you in on a big secret – are you ready? We're all getting older. Now you can go home and tell someone else the illumination you received at church this morning. I was in a group conversation, the sign of my age is I can't remember who I was with, but a member said in regard to aging, "From 40 to 50 hardly any difference, from 50 to 60 not too much, but from 60 to 70 oh boy, and then from 70 to 80, phew, and will let's not go any further.

Do you know how many quotes there are about aging and feeling good? Fills up half the internet. Why? Because many who age have trouble feeling good about it. St. Paul in his epistle today seems to be addressing this issue. He talks about "our outer nature wasting away", describing it as a "slight momentary affliction" and then says "if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed"; well none of our tents are destroyed but it may seem on some days that there is a hole in the roof letting in rain and bugs, water is seeping in from the floor and a windstorm has just blown all the tent pegs loose.

And to all this experience Paul says, "We do not lose heart". How do we not do that? Well there are over 10,000 cardiologists in the US and it's estimated that there are 1 to 1.5 million cardiac surgeries each year in the US – and those have certainly been helpful and needed and allow us to pitch our earthly tents in yet one more campground, and yet, does that keep us from not losing heart?

It is easy to lose heart, of course. The world and our experience of living within it, gives us all sorts of causes and reasons for discouragement – whether that's our own health issues or vitality, or those of someone we love. We experience it in our lives, in our communities, large and small, and in our congregations—this temptation to "lose heart." For when that which we see; that which we have come to rely on; that which has guided and governed our living; yes, that which the world says matters most, begins to erode? It is easy to despair. We can despair of the political realities of today, that everything is so fractious, that people see things so differently, that our communities are so divided. We can despair in our church congregations, it used to be so different, why there were children here and more people. We can despair within our family and personal relationships. It's not like it used to be. It will never get better. I'm not talking with him/her/them ever again. And to all this St. Paul says, "DO NOT LOSE HEART". Well why not?

In "The Lord of the Rings", the elves of Lothlorien admit that they are losing their forest lands. But they battle on, characterizing their struggle as "fighting the long defeat." In

“Letters of Tolkien”, Tolkien describes our human struggle in identical language: "Actually, I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' — though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory."

Some people think that this is too pessimistic or defeatist. Flannery O'Connor had a response to this criticism. To those who complained about her grotesque and deeply flawed characters in her novels, she insisted that "there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism."

Paul is a realist, not a sentimentalist. And his realism can be liberating and refreshing. So “*Salve Regina”* never made it into our hymnal. We don’t take on a “life is just “a vale of tears” theology with life as nothing more than one big medical office waiting room, and we’re just hanging on until we are called to heaven. Nor are we survivalists hunkering down in our bunkers with our shelves of rations waiting for the end to come, whether that’s by aliens or the government. No we are called to face our world head on, look at our communities and aging bodies with clear vision and open perspective.

So how do we not lose heart? In the end, Paul is an optimist: "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

What he’s saying is that in addition to attending to the outer nature, visiting our cardiologist and taking our medications as needed, we more importantly pay attention that our inner nature is being renewed daily – our life of prayer, our openness to the beauty of the created world, whatever we do to lift our spirits when are tents have sprung a leak. We fix our eyes on the unseen and eternal.

We're now nine weeks after Easter, and yet the epistle this week still reminds us of resurrection: "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus." The hope of the resurrection is Paul's prescription for our many burdens of "life in the body." We do not lose heart.