



***“Pass it On: Be the Yoke”***  
**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**  
*Matthew 11: 16-30*  
*March 17, 2019*

It’s not a theme for which we have to look very hard in Scripture. There were so many passages that could have drawn our focus into the strength of God.

- It’s a repeated theme in the Psalms:
  - God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. <sup>2</sup>Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, <sup>3</sup>though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our Fortress. (Ps. 46: 1-3. 11)
  - Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. (Ps 23:4)
  - The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. (Ps. 118:14)
- It’s a constant promise we hear in the prophets:
  - Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; <sup>31</sup>but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Is 40: 30-31)
  - GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights. (Habakkuk 3:19)
- We see it again and again in the New Testament letters:
  - But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup>That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12: 9-10)
  - I can do all this through him who strengthens me. (Phil 4:13)

I could go on all day with the plethora of Scriptural allusions to the strength that God provides in our lives, but I was drawn back to these words of Jesus in Matthew because, in so many ways, each of these promises, each of these places in which the strength of God is noted, point back to the same image that captures them all. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying

heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

There has always been something incredibly meaningful to me in the image of that yoke upon our shoulders. I’ve often focused on the yoke that someone might lay across their shoulders and use to carry heavy buckets of water or grain – and the image has always pointed me in the direction of being the thing that allows us to do that which we could not do on our own. Because of the yoke, we can carry the load that would otherwise drag us down. That’s always been the core of what I’ve taken from the promise of Jesus to be the yoke upon our shoulders – and it still is.

This week, however, especially in the wake of our Bible study on Monday evening and our theme of passing it on, I’ve found myself much more drawn into the image of the yoke that’s pictured on the front of the order of worship this morning. I want you to imagine a horse or an ox strapped to a steel plow trying to till the heavy land. He digs his hooves into the earth, he muscles his way forward with every step, he strains and struggles to pull the daunting load and the depth of each breath is visible as he exhales in the cold morning air. He presses on, girded by his own fortitude when he find himself sinking into the mud that accumulated in the night’s rains. He digs and he pulls, he struggles and he strives, but each step seems to get him nowhere. He’s just about to give in when, all of sudden, another walks up beside him. As the two stand side by side, that yoke is placed jointly across their shoulders and strapped to the plow behind. All of sudden, the load has changed. The weight is lighter, the strain is less, each slip of his hoof is compensated by the foundation of the other – he took the yoke of another onto his shoulders and suddenly his burden is light. That image has captured me, this week, because it says a lot about what it means for God to be the yoke upon our shoulders, but also because of what it says about what it would mean for us to be the same to others.

As we discussed this on Monday night, after spending a good portion of time exploring the notion of God’s strength in our lives, I asked the question, “What does it mean for us to be that strength for others.” The immediate response was simple, ‘Be the yoke!’ It is those three words that have echoed in my mind all week, and that kept pushing my heart and mind towards that picture of the two oxen plowing together. It’s helpful and empowering to think of the strength of God as akin to that yoke an individual might use to carry the weight across his or her shoulders, but the more I thought about the yoke across the shoulders of the two oxen, the more I couldn’t shake the core of what is needed to make that partnership a success.

You see, when we think of the image of those two animals teaming up to carry the heavy load, there are three things that need to happen...

First, the one who is straining with the load needs to embrace the humility of welcoming the help. We talked a lot about this in our series on the help of God back in January, so we don’t need to belabor it here. We have to be able to admit that we need it and willing to welcome it. In the language of that series, we have to ask for it.

Similarly (and yes, I'm skipping one here, but we'll come back to it), the third thing that needs to happen is that the two must work together to share the load moving forward. This has oft been my takeaway from these last few verses of Matthew 11. God is our yoke – not our valet. We so often fall into that false-narrative of faith that God will make things easy. You've heard me say it many times before – the promises of God do not include a promise of utopian simplicity in life. No, the promises of God are that God will help us endure the challenges that life thrusts upon us. God is going to help us carry the load, not do it for us.

There are three things that need to happen in that image of sharing the load through the yoke of another. One is that the burdened must welcome the help and another is that the two must then work together to manage the strain. Between those two, however, there is the entering in of the other – and that's really the image of those oxen that has overtaken me this week. There is great comfort that comes from the image of being stuck in the mud, overburden by task, or weighed down by the load that life has thrust upon us only to find that God enters into that pain, that sorrow, that strife, that struggle, whatever our trial may be...God enters into that circumstance, walks beside us in the darkest valley, and offers his yoke for our shoulders, that together, we might carry load and emerge from the darkness. There is incredible comfort that comes from that image of knowing that God enters into the depths of our darkness in order to walk beside us on the way out. There is an incredible challenge that emerges, however, when you flip that script in the context of passing it on.

'Be the yoke.' Those were the words that were uttered to put voice to what it would mean to be the strength of God to others in our lives. But, think about what that means.

- It means we need to be that second ox entering in to the sinking muddiness of another, strapping our shoulders to theirs and walking beside them on the way out.
- It means we need to be the one willing to leave the firm foundation beneath our grounded feet and enter into the instability and strife in which another has found themselves.
- It means that sometimes we can just stand at the rails of the boat and throw in the life-saver, because sometimes we're going to have to dive in and be the one to help them out of the darkness.

There's a story I've heard about a man who's walking down the street when he falls into this big hole. He looks around, but all he can see is darkness. With each passing moment he feels more alone, and the panic begins to set in. He hears a voice above – it's his doctor. He calls out, "Doctor, Doctor, I'm stuck down here, can you help?" The doctor writes out a prescription, throws it down the hole, and moves on. His minister comes by. "Pastor, hey, Pastor, I'm stuck down here, I need a way out." The minister writes down a prayer, drops it in the hole, and moves on. Then, a friend walks by. "Hey, Joe, down here. I'm stuck. I need a hand." Next thing you know, Joe jumps down in the hole with him. Our guy looks at him, "Are you stupid, what are you doing? Now we're both stuck down here." "Yeah," Joe says, "but I've been down here before, and I know the way out."

There's a whole lot we can say about the strength of God, but the thing that has echoed in my heart, this week, has been the fact that God ushers up beside us, yoke upon his shoulders, and offers us the other side that yoke to walk with us as emerge from the darkness. The thing that has echoed in my heart, this week, is that God enters into the very depths of our weakness to

bring us that strength. That's the strength we are trying to pass on. That's what it means to be the yoke for another!

- It means we need to be that second ox entering in to the sinking muddiness of another, strapping our shoulders to theirs and walking beside them on the way out.
- It means we need to be the one willing to leave the firm foundation beneath our grounded feet and enter into the instability and strife in which another has found themselves.
- It means that sometimes we can just stand at the rails of the boat and throw in the life-saver, because sometimes we're going to have to dive in and be the one to help them out of the darkness.
- It means, that sometimes, to be the yoke to another, we have to be the one to jump in the hole and hold their hands as they find the way out.