

Hope in the Shadow of death

Sermon for the 16th Sunday after Trinity — 2 Timothy 1:7–10 (NIV)

For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

In 2018, twelve boys between the ages of 11 and 16 went missing in a cave in Thailand. A sudden flood had sealed the entrance, and the children could no longer get out. They sat on a small ledge where there was water, but for 18 days the children had nothing to eat. Only with enormous effort were divers finally able to bring the children up from the depths, using oxygen and sedation. The whole time the children were underground, it was clear that the thick rock walls and the depth of the water were insurmountable obstacles that meant death. This small group of children on a ledge deep in the darkness represents a completely hopeless situation—one comparable to that of the church in every age.

In today's text, the apostle Paul writes to his student Timothy, and the same is clear there. Paul writes the letter to Timothy from prison, where there was no prospect of escape. Timothy, the apostle's student, was in a similarly hopeless situation. He had been called to lead the congregation. But internal tensions in the church, false teaching, and the threat from the state endangered him. Out of this situation of threat, Paul writes a letter to Timothy so that he would know how to cope with it. In doing so, Paul does not write that Timothy should pull himself together and conjure up strength from within. Paul does not respond to Timothy with a demand at all, but with a promise. The focus is turned around—away from the threat and toward what makes up Timothy, toward his identity. "God has not given us a spirit of fear." It is not about fear itself. It is not even about death itself, but about the fact that these things are not meant to define us. The word *deilia*, which Paul uses here, does not mean fear in general, but a holding-back on account of fear. It means an evasion, so that the gospel becomes subordinated to my own feelings, my own fear, and my own culture. In fact, behind this evasion lies the origin of all false teaching. It is not an evasion of this or that doctrine, but an evasion of Christ himself. And when Paul turns the focus away from fear toward Timothy's identity, he does not make the fear harmless—rather, he puts it in its place, so that Timothy can understand that the fear and the things that worry him are indeed threatening, but they have no room in our identity as Christians. They are subordinate to the gospel.

Paul thus appeals to the Spirit of God that was given to Timothy through the laying on of hands. He knows that Timothy does not stand as hopelessly before the power of death as the children in the cave, but rather that the Spirit of God is with him and will give him dynamic power in the very midst of this hopeless situation. He can and should rely on this power of God. Paul writes to Timothy: You do not have to draw from within yourself; rather, it is the Spirit that God has already given you that dwells in you. It is he who grants you power, love, and self-discipline. These words—power, love, and self-discipline—are what should help Timothy in his situation.

The words of the apostle Paul to Timothy apply equally to us as the modern church. These days I received an invitation from the bishop to a crisis synod. The synod is to take place on October 30, 2026. From the bishop's letter and from the situation of recent years, I sense that our church, too, is caught in a very great threat and crisis. The danger that we might split is great. The threat is unmistakable. And like Paul, we too must not downplay it. The forces confronting Timothy were tensions within the church and the threat from the state. What was meant to guide him was the identity he had received from God as a Christian. And the question we as Christians must grapple with is exactly the same: what, in fact, is our identity? Just as unmistakable as the rock walls surrounding the children in Thailand is the fact that we human beings are shaped by worldviews—from every direction. We are shaped by our experiences, by our upbringing, and by our cultural formation. These things are hard to think away. And yet they are not meant to shape us, and above all not to determine us. Only the identity we have from Christ should and may determine us. The danger in our church is great that, in the event of a split, our church would drift apart into two factions, with both directions falling into extremes. We should guard against that. How current the words of Paul are, and his call to power, love, and self-discipline, even in our own context!

Three words that carry great weight. Power is a dynamic force that stands against fear, even when confessing it means having to face disadvantages. "Therefore do not be ashamed of the gospel," says the apostle. The gospel is a call from God that reaches you personally in your life and from then on shapes and dynamically transforms your life. It is comparable to the message the children in Thailand received from outside the cave, that rescue was on its way and that divers were coming to bring them out of the place where they had gone missing. We Christians are just the same. We do not stand helpless before the threats of our world. God's word to us is a call from eternity, and this word has the power to break through the walls of darkness and death. Martin Luther once said: "When God speaks with you, whether through the law or through the gospel... then you are destined for eternity." That is the goal of his speaking. This word of God to us is what determines us from now on, even when it does not please us. In order to be rescued, the children in Thailand first had to dive into the depths with oxygen tanks. That must have been a huge challenge and threat for them. They had to go precisely to where the danger was greatest: into the water and into the depths. But the message from outside gave them the confidence that this was the only way to be saved. They trusted the words of

their rescuers, and only in this way could they be saved. It must be the same for us. Even when God's word does not fit our formation and culture, we trust God, who stands behind the word. And that gives us dynamic power to act even against our own feelings of fear.

As a church and as human beings, we stand before many threats. How will we come out of this threat? Our rescue has a name. This name is not merely a name, but a living person who embodies our church: Jesus himself. For the church is the body of Christ. And in Jesus himself we see how power, love, and self-discipline become effective. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was greatly afraid, and the danger before him was real. This fear is exactly the same feeling that all of us know well in our various situations. Christ was afraid not only of death, but of all the consequences of death: hell, death, and the devil stood before him. And we too must deal with precisely these enemies. The disciples of Jesus were so afraid that they fled in panic. Christ did not flee. Even in the deepest distress, he knew himself to be bound to God. Love drives him into the arms of God. He knows that God loves him, and therefore turns to God. He therefore also knows that the whole thing has a deep meaning, even though in that moment Satan even appears greater than God! "Your will be done," he says, showing, in the face of danger, great self-discipline—one that lets God's word count for more than the threat. Paul, sitting in prison, appeals again and again to this Jesus. He recognizes that Jesus, through his fear and suffering, not only understood the fear and suffering of human beings but also overcame them. The imprisonment, the fear of death, all the other things—they have a deep meaning. Nothing is coincidental, and at the end stands eternal life. At the end, God stands there with his blessing for us. This is what Paul wants to remind his friend Timothy of. The self-discipline, the love, and the courage that Paul wants to give his friend Timothy are not without reason. Everything has its reason in Christ. It is to him that he looks. Through him Paul also receives the Holy Spirit, so that he can believe and hope in a hopeless situation. What Paul describes here is the core of the gospel and is also the identity of the church. That is why, at every graveside, and when people are sick or must die—even when the situation is hopeless—we will again and again point to this Christ and draw strength from him. It is Jesus who has overcome death with all its consequences. And that determines everything else.

I know that our church is struggling hard to preserve unity. I also know of other people who are caught in crises and are urgently hoping for a solution. How fervently our Iranian brothers and sisters hope for a life in peace and a just life in Iran! Or how fervently some hope finally to receive a positive decision from the immigration office that they may stay in Germany! For others still, the hope would be that they are suddenly healed of an illness. Perhaps for us the greatest hope is that there might be a word from heaven to solve all these problems at a single stroke. I know that many of you may now be disappointed that this solution does not come all at once. But we must, unfortunately, keep experiencing again and again that here on earth we often stand before insurmountable obstacles that we cannot easily overcome. In these situations we are

often simply at a loss. But there is one situation in which I am not at a loss. And that is when it comes to life. Life that does not find its foundation in wealth or earthly power, but in Christ! This path in Christ is our future. It is also the only foundation that can carry us over from this life into the other world. Of this Christ I am not ashamed! And I do not draw back either. Amen.