

PUSH!

Isaiah 49:1-7

The Old Testament testimonies of the prophets are stories of apparent failures. Isaiah was in agony over the fate of his people. He laments in verse 4, “I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” Isaiah has called God’s people to return to God and they have not. He believes he is a failure. All of us have experienced failures in our own lives. The question is not why do we have them, but how do we respond to them? How do we deal with them?

First, we need to understand and accept that failure is really preparation. Failure is actually a necessary part of life. It is what anneals and strengthens us. Failures are learning experiences. We learn much more from our mistakes than we do from our successes. You learn little of life if you never fail. Listen to some successful failures:

- The great Polish pianist, Paderewski, was once told by his music teacher that his hands were too small to master the keyboard.

- Enrico Caruso, the famous Italian tenor, was told by his teacher that his voice sounded like wind whistling through the window.

- In 1902 *The Atlantic Monthly* sent a sheaf of poems back to the 28 year old writer with this curt note: “Our magazine has no room for your vigorous verse.” The poet was Robert Frost.

- In 1905 the University of Bern turned down a Ph.D. dissertation as being irrelevant and fanciful. Its author was Albert Einstein.

- The rhetoric teacher at Harrow School in England wrote on 16 year old Winston Churchill’s report card: “A conspicuous lack of success.”

A troubled man went to see an old and very wise rabbi. “Rabbi,” he said wringing his hands, “I am a failure. More than half the time I do not succeed in doing what I must do. Please say something wise, Rabbi.” The rabbi pondered a moment and then said, “Ah, my son, I give you this wisdom. Go to *The New York Times Almanac* for the year 1970 and look on page 930. There you will find peace of mind.”

The man did and found the lifetime batting averages of all the best baseball players. Ty Cobb, the greatest hitter of all, had a lifetime average of only .367.

Returning to the rabbi, the man said, “Ty Cobb - .367. That’s it?” “That’s it,” said the rabbi. “Ty Cobb got only one hit out of every three times at bat. He failed twice as often as he succeeded. So what do you expect already?”

“Ah,” said the man who thought he was a wretched failure because he failed only half the time.

I think you get the point. It is hard to accept failure and one of the hardest things to do is teach our children that it is okay to fail because you can then use it to advantage for the future. Stumbling blocks truly will one day become stepping stones. Isaiah understood that. He refused to give up. Neither should we. Success is born out of the crucible of failure.

Failure is firstly another word for preparation. Second, and more important, failure is a prelude to prayer. When is it that we pray the most fervently? When things are at their worst. So many of our prayers are head prayers. The more difficult life becomes, the more our prayers move from our head down begin coming from our heart.

Prayer is our act of asking God to be part of our failures. It is how we stay in tune with the Master and how we continue to find the strength to rise above our failures and move forward. Prayer is what allows us to have hope. Hope is the act of looking ahead with confidence to something good. Hope is not wishing, which is keeping your fingers crossed. Hope trusts in a positive outcome because our hope is vested in God. Hope is not grounded in wishing – it is grounded in prayer.

So, how much prayer is enough? There is no limit to prayer. Yes – God got it the first time. But we need to pray as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 “without ceasing.” Doing so keeps us involved in the situation and prayer continues to help position us for possibly being used by God as part of the solution,

and thus answer, to our prayer. Prayer also allows us to praise God and voice our complete trust for his will to be done. Praying when we fail brings us back to a realistic center of understanding that God continues to be with us, especially in the midst of our failure and despair.

There is a wonderful story about a man who was sleeping one night in his cabin when his room was suddenly filled with light and God appeared. The Lord told the man he had work for him to do. He took the man outside and showed him a large rock in front of his cabin. The Lord explained that the man was to push against the rock with all his might. This the man did, day after day. He toiled from sun up to sun down, setting his shoulders against the unmoving rock, pushing with all the strength he had. Each night the man went to bed aching and exhausted, feeling that the day had been spent in vain.

Negative thoughts began to consume him. He became disheartened, thinking he would just give up and quit. "Let the Lord find someone else to move the rock," he thought. But, loving God, he decided to take his concerns to the Lord in prayer. "Lord," he prayed, "I have labored long and hard in your service, putting all of my energy and strength into doing what you asked of me, Yet, I have not budged this mighty rock even one inch. What is wrong? Why am I failing?"

God responded compassionately. "My dear friend, when I asked you to serve me and you accepted, I told you your task was to push against the rock with all your strength, which you have done. I never told you I expected you to move the rock. Your task was simply to push. And now you have come to me with your strength expended, thinking you have failed. But is that really so? Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled, your back sinewy and brown. Your hands are calloused from constant pressure. Your legs have become massive and hard. Through opposition you have grown much and your abilities now surpass that which you used to have. You have not moved the rock. But your calling was to be obedient, to push and to exercise your faith and trust in me. That you have done. Now I, my friend, will move the rock."

When we hear the small still whisper of God's voice nudging us in a certain direction, we tend to want to thoroughly decipher what it is God is intending for us. What God actually wants is for us to just accept his call and have simple obedience and faith in him. We are to exercise the faith that moves mountains, but it is still God who actually moves the mountain.

Here is the word for today – and perhaps the rest of your life. The word is PUSH. When everything goes wrong and when you think you fail, just PUSH – and PUSH is an acronym for Pray Until Something Happens. When the job gets you down – PUSH! When people treat you badly – PUSH! When your money is gone and there are bills to pay – PUSH! Pray Until Something Happens.

It is a simple but important lesson. Failure, disappointment, and despair are merely preparations for successes. Failure prods us to pray. When we pray we are to PUSH, for when we pray, things happen. "I have labored in vain," writes Isaiah, "I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward is with my God."

Strive for your dreams. Work to make them a reality. Don't ever give up. And if you fail, then PUSH – Pray Until Something Happens – and trust in our God who never gives up on us. In that there is great hope for the future. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 16 January 2011