

2 Corinthians 12:9: But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Last semester, when Pastor Jim asked if I would speak in morning prayer, I had two immediate reactions.

To him, I said: "I can't handle this right now, but I'll reconsider in a few months." I've been exhausted and overwhelmed, fighting through a really hard situation. In a word, I've been feeling weak.

At the same time, I thought: "If I can handle this in a few months, I know exactly what the hymn has to be: How Firm a Foundation."

If I were to pick a favorite hymn based on poetic lyrics or a catchy tune that sticks with me for days, I've got other aesthetic choices. But *this* hymn has seen me through some dark and turbulent places. And, appropriate to our Monday theme, it's overflowing with Bible verses (... and that includes today's reading; so keep an eye out for it.)

There are numerous verses that talk about God's strength and His gracious protection. Some Biblical examples of things to be protected from, like persecution, famine, and swords don't track well with my life in 21st century Indiana. For that I am thankful.

But that doesn't mean life is without trials.

As author Rachel Held Evans eloquently describes: "A legion of voices are locked in an ongoing battle with God to claim our identity. To convince us we belong to them, that they have the right to name us. Where God calls the baptized *beloved child*, demons beckon with *rich, powerful, pretty, important, religious, esteemed, accomplished* and *right*. The great struggle of Christian life is to take God's name for us and to believe we are beloved and to believe that it is enough."

Important, esteemed, accomplished... these words are hard to avoid in academic life, and to be fair, there's satisfaction in a job well done, and in living out your calling well. But when things are going well, it's all too easy to put confidence in your own abilities and resilience. Those same demons beckon with words like *strong* and *self-sufficient*. The battle comes when these words become primary and more important than being a beloved child of God.

So it's less in a battle of physical danger, and more in one of emotional danger that I find myself weak and clinging to passages like today's reading and the others quoted in this hymn. This hymn first hit me hard nearly 8 years ago. 2014 was my best professional year up to that point in time. I had just earned tenure. Many things were going well at work and away. I was full of energy and focused on the next big goals to accomplish, confident in *my* capacity to take on the world. Then 2015. That summer, one of my best friends from graduate school completed suicide. All that professional energy and joy was sapped in an instant. I was functional for about 3 hours a day before I needed to collapse, but I couldn't really sleep either. I don't clearly remember about 6 months of my life from the shock. There were so many "why?" questions I wanted answers to and

still have no way of addressing. It hurt. tremendously.

One Sunday, still in a daze, I was sitting in the back row of church, when "How Firm a Foundation" was the closing hymn. I've sung this hymn about a million times, I know it by heart, but it had never caught my attention so forcefully as that fall morning. I'd had another night with minimal sleep wondering all the "why?" questions about the loss of my friend and praying for answers. Then that first verse pierced through the emotional fog: "what more can He say than to you He has said, you who to Jesus for refuge have fled?" It was as if God was calling through music: "hey Lara, I'm not ignoring your questions; listen up: here comes a flood of responses I've been giving you all along; and you need to pay attention."

Hear again the words we just sang together from Isaiah 41:

Fear not, I am with you, be not dismayed,
I am your God, and will still give you aid;
I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,
upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

What a redirect: just because there are specific answers I *want* about hard situations doesn't mean they're the answers I *need* to move forward in faith. At the same time, what encouragement: God is all-powerful, and He uses that strength not to thwart but to support and sustain.

My favorite verse of this hymn isn't in either of the chapel's hymnals. It's based on Isaiah 43. It says:

When through the deep waters I call you to go,
the rivers of sorrow will not overflow;
for I will be with you, your troubles to bless,
and sanctify to you your deepest distress.

What a fantastic promise: God does not abandon us to pain, but sticks with us through it and works for good.

I still don't have all the answers I've prayed for over the years.

And I really don't believe that "everything happens for a reason" in a sinful world where evil generates chaos.

But I do appreciate and *need* this regular reminder that it's not up to me to have all the answers, and it's not up to me to be accomplished or resilient or strong enough to fix my problems on my own.

I am thankful to be a beloved child, dependent on a God who reaches into trials, knows my weaknesses, walks with me, and continually reminds me of what I actually need to know: that He's working redemptively even in the darkest of places and that His gracious work is enough.