

Stand as You are Able

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At one of our services last year, it was time for the doxology, and although I wouldn't understand why until just this past week, something at that moment shifted for me. Nothing on that Sunday was particularly unusual. I think it was a typical service. There were announcements, scripture readings, etc. And our leader said the familiar words often spoken before the doxology: "Everyone, please stand as you are able." But for some reason, on that day, those words hit me as if I'd heard them for the first time. Stand. As. You. Are. Able.

When I got home, I felt compelled to jot the words down, not really understanding why. After all, it's not an unusual way to invite people to join in with a particularly reverent or communal part of the service. Especially in our congregation. Please, stand as you are able. It's a kindness, right? An allowance for those of us who at any given time, or perhaps always, find that standing is something we are unable to do.

Last fall, Alan, Kashi, and I went to a cabin on Rocky Lake for the weekend. We knew we wouldn't have too many more opportunities to give our fourteen-year-old Great Pyrenees one of these adventures. A cabin seemed like the safest way to give Kashi a comfortable camping experience. There were only a few steps leading up to the porch, and her portable ramp would work perfectly over them. But it didn't take long to find out our plan was deeply flawed. Our 114-pound, brittle-boned doggie began sliding off her ramp, and when I sprinted across the moss-covered porch to help Alan catch her, I slid—big time. BAM! Down I went, full force, slamming my right knee onto the hard decking. Please don't ask how the rest of the weekend went. Suffice it to say that it started pouring rain, and we went home early with a traumatized pooch. And I've been hobbling ever since. You simply don't heal as fast when you're sixty-four.

As I look out into the pews, at the choir, and on the Zoom screen, I see many heads that look like my own. "Aflame with winter," as it's so vividly described in one line of an exquisite poem by Jeanette Encinias titled "Beneath the Sweater and the Skin." Thanks, by the way, to our friend Sharon Mack for sharing this touching poem about aging. You'll want to read the entire poem, but have tissues nearby.

Standing up can be physically very challenging at any age. But this week I found deeper meaning in this simple command: Stand as you are able.

God calls us to stand every day. God calls us to act in this world, to heal wounds of the soul and body, to work for peace. *To love*. Oh, man, this stuff gets harder by the day, doesn't it? But hey, it could be worse. In chapter 6 of the Gospel of Mark, we are told that Jesus called the twelve disciples to Him and began sending them out in pairs to preach God's word. Jesus wasn't making it easy on them. He told the disciples not to take anything on their journey—no bread, no bags, and no money in their belts. Just a walking stick. Jesus must not have wanted them to fall and mess up their knees like I did. After all, they had a lot of walking to do.

But what about us? We mere mortals who don't have Jesus physically standing in front of us, not exactly ready to take no for an answer. What if we simply don't feel able to stand, to act in this wretched world? Jimmy Stewart certainly knew what that felt like. Well, his character did anyway, in the classic 1939 film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

Every Fourth of July, Alan and I watch this inspiring patriotic, albeit wholly idealistic, movie starring Stewart as the naïve hero Jefferson Smith. Corrupt politicians who need a temporary stooge in the Senate yank Smith out of the woods, where he's been teaching boy rangers about nature, common decency, "Love thy neighbor, and a little looking out for the other fellow too." If you know the movie, you know that Mr. Smith's starry-eyed patriotism gets doused with reality once he finds himself in the middle of a smear campaign. He literally *stands up* in the Senate to do the right thing, is promptly cut down at the knees by a corrupt system, and is almost never heard from again. Spoiler alert for those who haven't seen this Frank Capra classic: Mr. Smith stands back up again—in spectacular fashion.

But here is the real take-away. Mr. Smith, with all of his integrity, love of country, and devotion to Christian ideals, wasn't able to stand up on his own. If you ask me, the real hero of this film is Miss Saunders, the junior senator's cynical yet savvy chief of staff, played by Jean Arthur. After her boss is run out of the Senate, Saunders finds him at the Lincoln Memorial, sitting on his suitcase, head in hand, weeping in defeat. But with a rousing speech, Saunders brings her boss back onto his feet, ready to do battle and put a stop to the evils of Washington. Okay, I said it was an idealistic movie.

Now, mind you, I'm not suggesting that God is Jean Arthur, although I don't mind thinking of God as this tough-talking yet tender-hearted woman who's always got our back.

In Psalm 123 we have a different hero, David, and he too is lamenting, begging for help. "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt." I'm sure at one time or another, all of you have felt this kind of defeat, unable to stand up to unfair treatment. Times when you've been mocked or shamed, and knocked to your knees. Times you probably don't even want to think about because they are so painful.

I had one of those experiences last weekend. I'll spare you the gory details, for my sake as well as the sake of the person who brought me, figuratively, to my knees. In case you're wondering, it wasn't anybody in my family or in our fold, I assure you. But what I will tell you is that it was a powerful hit, bringing me to tears in public and knocking me down for the remainder of the weekend. I laid in bed all day Sunday angry and hurt, unable to move, much less stand. But after a day and night of crying and praying, I woke up on Monday with these words from Second Corinthians in my head: "The Lord said to me, 'My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness.'"

I was then able to stand up, shake off the dust of that day, and do the work that needed to be done. So, as you go off into your week, where hurt and defeat are lurking at every turn, remember, just stand as you are able. God will take it from there. And God is a mighty strong walking stick.