

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Epiphany 2

January 14, 2024

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

***Hold on tightly!***

<sup>13</sup> But we are always obligated to thank God for you, brothers, loved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation by the sanctifying work of the Spirit and faith in the truth. <sup>14</sup> For this reason he also called you through our gospel so that you would obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>15</sup> So then, brothers, stand firm and hold on to the teachings that were passed along to you, either by word of mouth or by a letter from us. <sup>16</sup> May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and in his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, <sup>17</sup> encourage your hearts and establish you in every good work and word.

—2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

One of the roller coasters at Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey starts with a catapult launch. The catapult propels the passenger-carrying train from a dead stop to 128 miles per hour in 3.5 seconds. The coaster then goes vertical and climbs to its apex 456 feet in the air, where it eases over the top and plunges straight down for 40 stories. The ride goes up then down again before returning to the station. The ride is over in about 50 seconds. Some passengers will exit the coaster and stagger dizzily and perhaps queasily away. Some passengers will get right back in line for another go. Everyone agrees: It's a wild ride!

Life has been compared to a roller coaster, and the comparison is fitting. We go through life with its ups and downs, its thrills and its disappointments, its delights and its challenges. But as wild as the ride might be, there's a big difference between the coaster at the amusement park and the roller coaster of life. The ride called life isn't over in 50 seconds. And most of the time there's no seat belt or lap bar holding you in. So hold on tightly!

Jesus called Andrew and Simon Peter to follow him. He called Philip and Nathanael to be his disciples. He invited them to come along with him for a wild ride—and a wild ride indeed it was! These disciples would be with Jesus when he was mobbed by the crowds craving healing and wanting bread. These and other disciples who heard Jesus' invitation, "Follow me!" would be with Jesus when he commanded demons to release their grip on possessed people, and the demons fled with a shriek. The disciples who followed him would watch Jesus walk on water, heal the blind, cleanse the lepers, even raise the dead. These disciples would finally follow Jesus to Jerusalem, where they would see their beloved master flogged and crucified and killed. These disciples would be cowering behind locked doors when they saw Jesus visit them, alive and well after he had risen from the dead. They didn't know it when Jesus called them, when Jesus said to Philip and Nathanael, "You shall see greater things than that," but with those simple words, "Follow me!" Jesus laid on these men the highest honor and the greatest privilege that any human being could ever know. Jesus invited these disciples to come with him on the privileged journey of being a Christian, a follower of Christ, to experience the ups and downs of discipleship, to ride the roller coaster of life to its climax, when these disciples earned their martyr's crown and inherited the gift of eternal life.

That same privilege, that same invitation, that same call, has been given to you—the honor and privilege of being a Christian, a follower of Christ, a disciple of Jesus. The Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter to the Christians in Thessalonians, tells them and us the mind-blowing truth that God chose us *from the beginning* to share in the privilege of following Jesus. *But we are always obligated to thank God for you, brothers, loved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation by the sanctifying work of the Spirit and faith in the truth. For this reason he also called you through our gospel so that you would obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

When Jesus called you by name in Holy Baptism, when Jesus caused you to be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, when the Spirit of Jesus came to live in your heart, he called you to come with him on a wild ride through this life. There will be times of ecstatic joy, when it seems like nothing can move you or shake you. There will also be times of terrible temptation, when every fiber of your natural self wants to turn away from Jesus and pursue a different kind of pleasure. There will be heavy crosses to bear. There will be times of terrible loss, times when life seems dark and gloomy. Jesus never promised that your life as his disciple would be simple and sedate and easy. Calling your life as a Christian a roller coaster is fair, so hold on tightly! Hold on tightly on your wild ride with Jesus through life.

Hold on tightly to what? Hold on to the teaching you have been given. Paul tells the Thessalonians and us, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold on to the teachings that were passed along to you, either by word of mouth or by a letter from us." Hold on tightly to the teaching you have been given. Don't hold on tightly to your emotions;

they are all over the place. Don't hold on tightly to your reason; it can mislead you. Don't hold on tightly to your wealth; it evaporates like the mist. In all situations, hold on tightly to the Word of God. Hold on to the truth.

It's hard to hold on tightly to the teachings that were passed along to you because Satan is going to throw everything at you, follower of Jesus, to try to get you to loosen your grip on God's Word, and to get you to hold on tightly to something else.

It's hard to hold on to Jesus when you're a teen, and you want to be free and do your own thing, but your parents keep putting limits and restrictions on what you can do, even as they tell you how much they love you in doing it. It's hard to hold on to the teaching that says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Honor your father and your mother and show them love and respect (Ephesians 6, Exodus 20).

How important it is to hold on tightly to the teachings that were passed along to you when you're in college, and for the first time in your life you're exposed to new friends, new cultures, new ideas, new opportunities, and new temptations. Hold on tightly to the teaching to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith (Hebrews 12), and to love, honor, and serve only him—when everyone around you is calling you in a different direction.

It's hard to hold on tightly to the teachings of Jesus when you graduate from college and get your first real job, and in your new career they throw at you more money than your parents ever made. More than ever, it's important to hold on to Jesus' teaching: Seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6).

How important it is to hold on tightly to the teachings you've been given when you meet that special someone that you want to spend the rest of your life with, and the temptation is strong to be intimate with that person before you're married, maybe even move in together, as pagans all around us are doing these days. When your whole body is consumed by passion and desire, how important it is to hold tightly to the teaching that marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure, because God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral (Hebrews 13).

It's critical to hold tightly to the teaching of God's Word when your marriage becomes dull and lackluster and boring and argumentative and adversarial, and greener pastures of fun and excitement call to you from the outside. It's hard to hold tightly to the teaching to guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. I hate divorce, says the LORD God (Malachi 2). It's hard to hold tightly to the teaching that there is no divorce without sin, that the only permissible reasons for divorce are marital unfaithfulness (Matthew 19) and unbelieving desertion (1 Corinthians 7). And that remarriage after an unscriptural divorce is adultery (Matthew 19).

It's so important to hold tightly to the teaching you've been given when your next-door neighbor is a Muslim or a Mormon or an atheist or a same-sex couple. And when you get to know them you find out they're the nicest people in the world; they don't have fangs, and they are kind and helpful. It's hard to hold on tightly to the teaching that Jesus is still the only way to heaven. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14). He tells us that unless we repent of our sins we will perish (Luke 13), and that anyone whose name is not found in the Lamb's book of life will be cast into eternal fire (Revelation 21).

How important it is to hold on tightly to Jesus when your life is close to an end, and the devil uses the opportunity to parade all your sins of the past in front of you, to plant the seeds of doubt, to fill you with anxious thoughts, and to instill fear. How important at the close of life to hold on tightly to the promise that God will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13), not even in the hour of death. How important to hold on to the truth that God, who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will graciously give us all things. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and nothing—neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8). Hold on tightly to Jesus' words, "I am going to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back to take you with me, that you also may be where I am" (John 14). In the hour of death, hold on tightly, do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.

When you leave God's house today, refreshed by Holy Communion, your sins forgiven, at peace with God, and you head back out onto the wild roller coaster of life, hold on tightly to the teaching you have been given. Hold on tightly to God's Word, the Word of truth. And *may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and, in his grace, gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and establish you in every good work and word.* Amen.