

From Jennifer, Susan, and Porter, to the church in Virginia, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you, and peace. We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before God the work you do because of your faith, your labors of love, and your **steadfastness of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.[i]

2020 has felt anything but steady. Who among us has not felt overwhelmed? Who among us has not doubted our own physical, emotional, and spiritual stamina?

We never expected to enter this wilderness – but the People of God have been here before. We have been lost before, between the old and the new - upon leaving Eden, upon leaving Ur and Haran, upon fleeing to Egypt, upon fleeing from Egypt. We have crossed into unknown lands “where there be giants” and found intense struggle along with the milk and the honey. We have been dragged from our beloved place of worship into exile, we’ve come home to political unrest, disenfranchisement, and violence. We have had to worship in small home groups and in tombs, with infrequent visits and letters from our leaders.

How has hope survived? How on earth did the message from heaven of the saving love of God ever survive the anxiety, pain, and disappointment of our lived experience of politics, pestilence, and dislocation? Where did our ancestors find the fortitude? What can sustain us through 2020?

I’ve been thinking lately about *Endurance*. In 1914, on an expedition to cross Antarctica on foot, Ernest Shackleton’s sailing ship, *Endurance*, was crushed in the ice of the Weddell Sea. He and his crew were trapped on the ice, with no communication, for **20 months**. They survived on an ice floe, without setting foot on solid ground, for 497 days before reaching Elephant Island, where there were longer delays, followed by Shackleton’s 15-day small open-boat voyage, with five others, across 720 nautical miles to South Georgia. After three attempts, the crew was rescued. Not a single crew member was lost. There is much to learn from Shackleton’s story and his family motto, for which his ship was named: *Fortitudine vincimus* (“By endurance we conquer”).

Shackleton survived – and conquered his circumstances – with the same outlook that got Admiral Jim Stockdale through seven years as a prisoner of war in the Hanoi Hilton. His philosophy, as described to Jim Collins, is known as the “Stockdale Paradox”: *You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.*

In other words, neither despair nor denial is helpful. What does help is a combination that irreligious people find paradoxical: Clarity combined with faith. That is the way of the People of God. We call it “steadfastness.”

In our world, the world of a good God, a good creation, and plenty of trouble along the way, we are sustained by the steadfast love of God. The way things are is often not the way things are intended to be. That is not the end of the story. We have

something more than endurance. We have steadfastness. We live in the sure and certain hope of Resurrection.

In this time of disease and discord, disappointment and even despair, we are sustained by the steadfast grace, mercy, and love of God. When the world wobbles beneath our feet, we stand on the promises of God. When our hearts melt in fear and our vision dims, we look to God's fearless vision for our lives and our world.

The psalms tell our stories of trauma and triumph. We have been here before, and we have endured – not by our own strength, but by the steadfast strength and love of God. By that steadfast love, we survive and we thrive.

Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord! -Psalm 117

Praise the Lord, beloved ones. Lean on his steadfast faithfulness.
He will see us through.

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[i] 1 Thess. 1:1-3, *The New Brooke-Davidson Version*.