

Put Your Faith in God Alone
Psalm 146; Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-11; Matthew 11:2-11
West Valley Presbyterian
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Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? When then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the lead in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

1. Life is good. God created life; God gave us our lives. And, life is also very difficult at times, and has been ever since Eden.

2. We all know about difficulties. So does Scripture. Throughout Scripture we see descriptions of life’s difficulties, including in the passages for today:

A. Psalm 146 mentions political difficulties – “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.” Even the very best of our human leaders aren’t permanent. They get voted out of office; make mistakes; make enemies; and eventually they die and their plans die with them. So our ultimate trust shouldn’t go to politicians of any variety.

Isaiah 35:3-6:

3 Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.

4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! ...

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,

B. Isaiah 35 speaks of weak hands, feeble knees, and fearful hearts, which we know something about! I’m surprised he didn’t also include aching backs and stiff shoulders while he was at it!

- a. Isaiah does, however, also include difficulties such as inability to see, or hear, or walk, or speak.
- b. He mentions the difficulties of nature, such as drought and lions and jackals.

C. Even prophets get discouraged with the difficulties of life. Even notable, famous prophets who have been faithfully saying what God told them to say.

Matthew 11:11a Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist,

- a. That's the situation in Matthew 11. John, whom we heard from last week in his fiery sermon, did prepare the way for Jesus (though his preaching probably scared people into repentance). He did baptize Jesus, and he did get people to think about what God might be doing, right there and right then, in their midst, at that moment.
- b. Jesus says in v. 11 that "among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." John is certainly greater than Herod Antipas, who put him in prison.
- c. And yet, John IS in prison. He's shortly going to be beheaded. And Jesus isn't doing what John expected him to do. So John is discouraged. He wonders if his own ministry has been for nothing. That's why he sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the Messiah, or should we wait for somebody else?"

D. If even prophets get discouraged, then it's no surprise that we sometimes do as well.

3. So what do we do in the midst of life's difficulties? Today's passages tell us that the best thing we can do is to put our faith in God alone.

A. Psalm 146:5 says, "Happy are those **whose help is in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God**".

- a. And why would that be? Because, the psalm continues in vv 6-7, God is the one "who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry." God has the power, the faithfulness, and the lovingkindness to be completely trustworthy.
- b. Human governments may do their best. But God is the only one worthy of our full trust.

B. Isaiah 35 says, "Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you' (v. 4)." That can be REALLY good news!

- a. When was the last time you felt anxious? For instance, if a person who is shouting angrily gets too close to you?
- b. In those anxiety-producing situations, wouldn't it be great to know that God is right there with you? Shielding you, fighting for you, rescuing you from harm?

c. Putting our faith in God alone means that we don't have to be anxious. God has got this, whatever 'this' is, and we can trust him completely.

C. And in Matthew 11, Jesus tells us to look around! Look at what God has already done in our midst, and at what God is doing right now! He says, vv 4-6, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

a. Jesus was referring to Isaiah 35 there (the same Isaiah passage we were just looking at). For reasons of timing, he didn't want to publicly say, right then, "Yes, I am the Messiah that John predicted" in front of a big crowd of people. It wasn't time for his earthly ministry to end yet.

b. So what he did was to quote one of Isaiah's predictions of what the Messiah will do: open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf; heal the lame so that they can walk and run and leap; give speech to the speechless; and bring healing to all of creation. And then he says, essentially, "This is all happening."

c. Was that the answer John expected? Perhaps not. But that was what God was doing. And putting all one's faith in God alone does make it a lot easier to see what God is doing – both back then and right now.

4. Why should we put our faith in God alone?

A. What happens if we don't?

a. We all have faith; it's wired into us. The only question is, where do we put that faith? Do we put it in things? Do we put it in people?

b. If you put your faith in things, I guarantee that your faith will be shattered at some point. Money? The cryptocurrency crash is just the latest financial crash. A lot of people put their faith and their investments in some giant Ponzi scheme, and wind up with nothing. Or, putting your faith in a house? Well, Rob and I lived 13 years in Tuolumne County, and we learned that houses aren't permanent. In the foothills, your house might get smashed by snow-laden trees in the winter, or burned up by wildfires in the summer.

c. Well, what if you put your faith in people? If you do that, at some point, your faith will be shattered. People are not perfect. We have been known to hurt one another, betray one another, war against one another. Our spouses aren't perfect. Our siblings aren't perfect. Our fellow church members aren't perfect. Even our parents, whom we completely trusted when we were little, well, sooner or later we learn that our parents aren't perfect either.

d. We all are going to put our faith somewhere. If we put it in something or someone that isn't God, sooner or later reality is going to intervene; and that misplaced faith will shatter.

B. What happens if we do put our faith in God alone? Well, that faith will never be shattered. And, it will uphold your life and help you get through the difficult times.

a. For example: The first church I served after seminary was a rural church in southern Virginia. One of the elders there was a man about my age. He could move one part of one hand, and that was all. He'd been driving home late at night. A deer jumped right in front of his truck; he swerved to avoid the deer; and he smashed into a tree.

b. At first, he wished he had died. He was in rehab for months and months just to regain that little bit of mobility in one hand. He had been a good old country boy, planning to farm as his parents did. What was he going to do now?

c. He turned to God, that's what he did, and he put his faith in God. And as he prayed, he gradually came to feel that God had preserved his life for a reason. Even though he wasn't miraculously healed, God had many things for him to do.

d. He decided that it was time for him to stop feeling sorry about what he couldn't do, and figure out what he could do.

e. Farming was out. But there was that one hand he could move. So he had a special stylus made and strapped on, so he could tap out keys on a keyboard. Then he learned mathematics and computer science. By the time I met him, he had a college degree and had worked his way up to become the vice president of the local bank. He was a wise and helpful elder. He was a generous man, who would secretly help people in need. He married, and adopted his stepson. To this day, that church is still doing well, in part because of him.

f. He told me that, because of God, he'd been able to do more with his life after his accident, than he ever would have done if the accident hadn't happened. He said that he'd mostly just wasted his time in high school, because he already knew how to hunt and fish and grow tobacco; and what more did you need?

g. But God had shown him his true capabilities, and taught him to use his intelligence. He gave God all the credit for the successes he'd had in life against the odds.

h. That's what it looks like, to put our faith in God alone. If we put our faith in things or in people, our faith will be shattered. If we put our faith in God, our faith will grow stronger and we will be able to do amazing things.

5. How do we put our faith in God alone?

A. Well, like everything else, it takes practice.

a. If, for example, you are worried about something, you could stop right there, right in the middle of your worry, and pray about it. Turn it over to God. Let God worry about it.

b. How often do you worry about something during the day? 5 times? 50 times? Well, if you stop right in the middle of your worry, every time, even if it's 50 times a day, you're going to get lots of practice in putting your faith in God. And pretty soon you'll get good at it.

c. Do you think you could try that right now? Think about something that's worried you recently. Maybe it's a near miss. Maybe it's something that someone has said. It could be a big thing or a small thing, it doesn't matter.

B. And, it also takes encouragement as we are learning a new practice. That's part of the reason there are Advent books for everyone. The Advent devotionals are based on the same Scriptures that you hear in worship, and they reinforce what you hear from the preachers. For example, tomorrow is Monday of the 3rd week of Advent, and the article is all about putting our trust in God instead of in markets or finances or governments. If you read your Advent booklet for each day, that will encourage you as you practice.

C. If you need an Advent book, there are plenty in the entry area where you came in. One please per family, so that everyone will have access to it.

6. So, give it a try. Let's all try putting our faith in God alone, every day this week. Let's try turning worries over to God. Let's try reading through the Advent book, 3rd week, page 70, one reading for each day. As we stop putting our faith in things, or in people, we will be less likely to be shattered. As we start putting our faith in God alone, we will be more likely to overcome life's hardships and find joy. Amen.