

Riding the Currents of God's Faithfulness

An sermon based on Lamentations 3:1-2, 19-23; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; and Matthew 6:25-33

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Several people have mentioned to me that the worship services this summer were especially good, and that the sermons were of a very high calibre! I attended several of the services myself and I agree, the services were superb. Chip and his committee, as well as all of the participants—worship leaders, singers, speakers—deserve the affirming and encouraging words I've heard. Indeed, if I have any criticism at all, it has to do with only one aspect of the services.

It's not even one aspect so much, as perhaps a sin of omission, if you will. I probably shouldn't mention it, but as I've thought about it, it seemed a rather glaring omission. And it has to do with the theme we chose for the summer services, the "Fruit of the Spirit".

It's not even the theme so much; in fact, I have chosen the sub-theme of faithfulness for my next three sermons, and it isn't because Marlene Janzen's sermon on that theme was particularly deficient in any regard; it's just a theme that's been on my heart this summer.

I hesitate to rain on the summer services parade, and when you come right down to it, it's not even the theme so much, as it is the actual fruit that was chosen for each Sunday's sub-theme. Oh, it was fascinating to see what the person telling the children's story would do, trying, for example, to relate the characteristics of a banana to the theme of patience, or an orange to the theme of kindness, or watermelons to joy. But the omission that became clear to me as the summer drew to a close—with all due respect to Patty and Chip, whose drew up the list of fruit—was the particular fruit associated with the theme of faithfulness. Patty did an admirable job of trying to see in an apple a symbol of the spiritual fruit of faithfulness, and it was sufficiently memorable that I recall it, but when all is said and done, I realized it was the wrong fruit!

Faithfulness suggests loyalty, trustworthiness, constancy, a resolute, staunch, steadfast heart. I would have chosen a different fruit to symbolize those qualities. I would have chosen "missakqhahtoomina".

"Missakqhahtoomina" is the Cree word for a large, delicious purple berry found in Saskatchewan—the saskatoon berry. And it seems particularly apropos to the theme of faithfulness for several reasons. For one thing, saskatoon berries contain higher levels of protein, fat, and fibre than most other fruit, and faithfulness certainly requires a good deal of moral fibre.

Saskatoon berries are rich in vitamins and minerals, but they also have a sweet taste; there's nothing as delicious as saskatoon berry jam or saskatoon berry pie. Similarly, faithfulness, while it may appear boring and monotonous to many, has its own wonderful

sweetness, a taste often noticed or acquired only after years of establishing and confirming its worth in a relationship.

Saskatoon berries are also wild berries, not in the sense of wanton, undisciplined, unrestrained behaviour, but in the sense that saskatoons cannot be artificially produced. Oh, there have been attempts to do so, and several such projects are commercially viable, but the prairie palate cannot be easily fooled. The best saskatoon berries are those that grow in the wild, ironically in dry, sandy loam—which accounts for most of Saskatchewan. They will not do well in richer soils or in soggy soils. They are a hardy plant, and they do best, it seems, in circumstances that would intimidate a lesser plant.

Faithfulness Requires a Hardy Soul

Faithfulness also requires hardiness. Depth of commitment is not for the weak of heart or mind, because there is much that threatens to erode the depth of our commitments. Faithfulness is closely associated with trust, and while any untoward circumstances can affect our ability to trust, it is especially the untrustworthiness of people that affects us deeply and tempers our trust in faithfulness of any sort. Consider the pain of a loved one's desertion, and its devastating effects upon our sense of trust, not to mention the feelings of rejection and despair that prove overwhelming. Broken promises erode our trust; unpleasant surprises can damage trust; betrayal erodes trust; so do secrecy, suspicion, and manipulation.

We raise our children to be trusting, and we do what we can to earn their trust, but at the same time we also teach them to be wary of strangers! We ourselves want to trust others, but none of us wants to be played for a fool! It's a delicate balance; trust without intelligence makes for gullibility, but too much distrust, and one's life becomes rather fearful and lonely. Garrison Keillor, in his '95 theses, says that his parents, community and church tipped the balance too far on the side of wariness; he writes, "You have taught me to fear strangers and their illicit designs, robbing me of easy companionship, making me a very suspicious friend. Even among those I know well, I continue to worry: what to they really mean by liking me?" (Lake Wobegon Days, #7, page 254)

I don't want to be played for a fool, but to think of others and of the world as fundamentally deceptive makes for a rather drab, joyless, cautious, even ridiculous existence. In a play entitled "Alice Through the Looking Glass," Alice encounters a white knight carrying a beehive.

"What are you carrying that for?" she asks.

"Well, if I run into a swarm of bees, I can catch them," says the knight.

"What about those mouse traps? What are you doing with those?" asks Alice.

"Well," responds the knight, "I might run into some mice too, and I can then catch them."

"But what about those knives around the feet of your horse?"

"Well, I might be crossing some rough waters," says the knight, "and if I run into sharks, the knives on the feet of the horse will ward them off."

There are many dimensions of human nature and human interaction that hinder and erode trust, but without trust ours would be a fairly impoverished and wretchedly cautious existence! It takes an exceptionally hardy soul to weather the assaults on trust

and faithfulness and still retain a measure of confidence in others. And, I must say, I did not find it particularly encouraging when I looked up the Hebrew word for trust used in the psalms. Somewhat surprisingly, that word has a negative sense, consistently, when applied to relationships between human beings. “Even my bosom friend,” he says in one psalm (41:9), “...my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread...”—even this closest of friends proved unworthy of his trust.

Whenever the Hebrew word for trust is used by the psalmist, it has the sense of over-trustingness, to the point of gullibility. I would have hoped for something a little more upbeat in the Bible, particularly in the psalms, but as I reflected upon this disillusioning discovery, I also discovered that the same word has a consistently positive sense when applied to trust in God.

The Foundation of God’s Faithfulness

The Scriptures do not counsel “timidity” (2 Timothy 1:7, RSV) or “cowardice” (NRSV), but in the biblical scheme of things confidence is always derivative of trust in God. Human confidence, and confidence in humans, for that matter, rest on the foundation of God’s faithfulness. That is the starting point in any discussion of faithfulness.

And the Scriptures are unremitting in their praise of God’s faithfulness. “I have spoken of your faithfulness,” says the psalmist (40:10). “I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.” “Great is His steadfast love toward us,” he says (117:2), “the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.” “For the Lord will not abandon His people, nor will He forsake His inheritance.” (94:14, NASB)

Such high praise of God’s faithfulness comes from even such an unlikely source as the Old Testament book of Lamentations! Here is an entire biblical book devoted to the blues—it’s bluesier than B.B. King and Stevie Ray Vaughn put together! It’s a relentless recital of destruction and sorrow and pain, yet in the midst of this mournful recital its author raises the flag of God’s faithfulness. “The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!”—“bitterness and gall” (NIV)—“My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me,” which I take to be the biblical equivalent of severe depression! “But this I call to mind,” he says, “and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (3:19-23)

The New Testament, our reading from 1 Corinthians included, echoes the same phrase. “God is faithful,” writes Paul (1 Corinthians 1:9). And it is on the basis of God’s faithfulness that Paul is able to encourage the very human members of the Corinthian congregation, giving thanks for the work of God’s grace in their lives (1:4-6), giving thanks for their spiritual gifts (1:7), and filled with confidence that with God’s strength they will “be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:8)

There is something encouraging, ennobling, and inspiring about God’s great faithfulness. “Your steadfast love...,” says our call to worship from Psalm 36, “Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. ...How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house... You give them drink from the river of your delights.” (36:5, 7-8)

A mother who was sharing some of these great biblical expressions of God's love and faithfulness with her young daughter asked her, "Don't you think that's wonderful, dear?" "No," replied the young child. Thinking her daughter had misunderstood her, she repeated the question. Again the young girl shook her head and said, "Mommy, it would be wonderful if it were anyone else, but really, it's just like God."

God's great faithfulness lends to our human relationships a trust that transcends human trust, so that it is no longer necessary to anticipate or avoid every unsavoury experience. We trust in God's faithfulness in the face of every circumstance, for better or for worse.

Farmers, especially those who have tilled the sandy soil of Saskatchewan, are a hardy lot. They have to be, for their very livelihood and fortune is subject to the capricious nature of the weather. When one farmer put up a weather vane on his barn on which were inscribed the words, "God is faithful," one of his neighbours teased him, saying, "I suppose that means that God is faithful if the wind blows in the right direction!" "No," said the farmer, "it means that God is faithful no matter which way the wind blows."

Dorothy's family and neighbours used to hire young men from Ontario to help with the harvest. In fact, I met one of them last week, at the funeral of Dorothy's sister, Alice. He remembered vividly his work on a Guernsey farm in 1948! And though I don't know if he was the one, Dorothy tells me that one year one of the hired hands introduced a hymn in church, and said that the words of the hymn always reminded him of Saskatchewan, especially the words,

God hath not promised smooth roads nor wide

Swift easy travel, needing no guide... God's faithfulness carries no guarantee that our lives will be filled with comfort and contentment. God's faithfulness bestows no immunity to misfortune, desertion, illness, or death. Dreadful times come upon both the just and the unjust. God may not protect us from dreadful experiences, but God does promise to bless us with His presence in the midst of those experiences. As the old hymn continues...

God hath not promised
Flower-strewn pathways
All our lives through;
God hath not promised
Sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow
Peace without pain.

But God has promised
Strength for the day,
Rest for the labour,
Light for the way,
Grace for the trials,
Help from above,
Unfailing sympathy,
Undying love.

Ride the Currents of God's Faithfulness

It is interesting to note the language used in our response to God's faithfulness. I often say to people who are in distressing circumstances, "Hang in there," but when I think about it, it's really not the most encouraging thing to say! At best, it implies living at a very basic coping level. At worst, it conjures up an image of someone dangling from a cliff, hanging on to a rather tenuous branch, a few milligrams away from impending doom!

The biblical language of faithfulness and trust is much more encouraging, implying, at the very least, a firm stance. It's the kind of image suggested, for example, by the biblical promise, "Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusts in thee." (Isaiah 26:3, RSV) Or, as the psalmist says about those who trust in God, "They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, trusting in the Lord." (Psalm 112:7, NRSV/RSV)

There is, however, an even more uplifting biblical image associated with God's faithfulness, and it's found in our Gospel reading. When Jesus' disciples asked him about the things that caused them anxiety and eroded their trust in God and in one another, his counsel was simple, but vivid; he said, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ...can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ... Therefore do not worry... do not worry about tomorrow..." (Matthew 6:26-27, 31, 34)

When distrust makes us feel uneasy, unsure of ourselves, and worried about tomorrow, Jesus says: Look at the birds of the air! God takes care of them! And if God considers us of even more value than birds, then we can relax and trust God to do the same and more for us. When we grow faint and weary, and even the young among us fall exhausted, Isaiah too says: Look at the birds of the air! They "...who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles." (Isaiah 40:31, RSV) It's a beautiful and inspiring image, but to fly, spiritually, includes risk, and requires no small measure of trust in God's faithfulness.

There was a family of eagles who lived on a mountain, a very high mountain overlooking the surrounding countryside. From their vantage point they could see the village below, with its winding stream and farmland in the distance. One day the mother-eagle looked at her young in the nest and said, "The time has come. You must learn to fly!"

"But how?" replied the young ones with more than a little uneasiness in their voices.

"You must go to the edge of the cliff," said the mother, "and throw yourself forward into the wind."

The anxious young eagles looked at each other, walked cautiously to the edge, looked down very carefully, and quickly scrambled back to the safety of their nest.

The next day the mother-eagle told her young once again that the time had come for them to fly.

"It's far too high," said one of the young eagles. "We might fall," said another.

"I'm frightened," said a third.

The mother was insistent, however. “Come to the edge,” she urged repeatedly. “Come to the edge. Don’t be frightened.”

Gradually they neared the edge of the cliff, and as they did so she gently nudged them forward into the wind, and as they spread their wings the wind lifted them into graceful flight! (Charles Arcodia, Stories for Sharing)

God invites us to come to the edge. Come to the edge and ride the currents of God’s faithfulness, trusting that underneath are God’s everlasting arms.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.