

SEEING IS BELIEVING - NONACCEPTANCE  
A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW 11:20-30  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO  
SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2020  
10:00 a.m.

Faith does not always come easy.

This can be particularly true in difficult times like the ones we are in.

It isn't always easy to trust God when there's big stuff in your life;

living with an illness,

transitioning into life's next stage,

beginning something new,

watching something end,

taking a risk in obedience,

job loss and financial strain

or even having the fortitude to just stay inside and wait.

And really, never mind having enough faith for tough times,

sometimes having faith that God simply exists at all

on a regular day, faith doesn't always come easy then either.

We can be desperate for assurance of God's presence,  
evidence of God's existence,  
notice of God's attention,  
conviction of God's care.

Faith does not always come easy.

I grew up in church.

My home church was quite literally in my back yard.

My bedroom window looked out at the white clapboard building.

If there was some event happening in the evening,

the stained glass windows shone out their message,  
seemingly just for me.

The shadows in my room at night were those

cast by the spotlights shining on the tall white steeple.

I grew up, quite literally overshadowed by the church.

I ran through my backyard to Sunday School.

Then to youth group.

Then to Bible Studies and committee meetings.

I don't remember a time when church was not part of my life.

But even growing up so close to it all,

faith did not always come easy.

I remember struggling for faith,

grasping for the ability to believe in the existence of God.

I remember as a young teen

being quite desperate for some sign,

to have some evidence,

that the God whom my beloved Sunday School teachers,

and youth leaders had told me about,

was really there.

I couldn't figure out why God wouldn't help me out.

Give a little sign, some sort of signal, something to hold on to,

something to show me he was there.

I would envy the people in my Bible.

I would envy those people who got to be with Jesus,

walk with Jesus, live near Jesus, hear him in person,

because they got to see more  
than pictures on a felt board,  
or a story book held up with pictures for me to see.  
They were present for bona fide miracles.  
How could they not believe?  
In my mind it would be so easy to have faith,  
if I had just been there.

I envied those who got to eat their fill on the hillside,  
when Jesus fed the five thousand,  
with loaves and fish that seemed to have come  
from heaven itself.

I envied those who would have got dirt in their eyes,  
and in their hair, and straw and dust on their clothes,  
as it fell on them from above  
because their neighbours were digging through the roof  
to lowered that paralyzed man from down the street in front of Jesus,  
and in front of them.  
They would have seen the man,

their neighbour,

take his mat and walk away. Amazing.

I envied those who knew the family of the girl who had died,

who were in the crowd outside the her house,

ready to begin the ritual of mourning.

I wish I could have been part of the crowd

who was there when Jesus showed up.

I would have liked to have heard the whispered scorn

when he said she was just sleeping.

How easy would it have been to believe

when that girl walked out of the house

after Jesus told her to get up?

I would have loved to hear Peter's mother-in-law for myself.

Hear her tell the story of how Jesus rebuked the fever in her,

and she was immediately well.

I would have loved to have listened to her complain,

that Jesus' healed her only to have her son-in-law ask

"I brought some new friends home,

can you get them something to eat?”

I envied those in the crowd who were there

when Jesus stopped and said,

‘Who touched me?’,

only to discover that a woman who had been bleeding  
for twelve years,

was the one who had reached out

and grabbed his cloak,

and she was now healed.

I remember wishing I could have been there.

I envied those who had their sight restored,

and those who saw them; before and after.

I envied those who had demons cast out of them,

and those who saw their transformation.

All these people I envied,

everyone I just mentioned,

were from the towns of Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Korazin.

They all were from the north shore of the sea of Galilee.

They were in the vicinity for it all.

All those miracles took place right there.

In fact the area of these three towns is where Jesus lived

and taught most of the three years of his ministry.

He grew up in Nazareth to the west.

But Capernaum is where he went to live and to work.

The majority of the miracles you read of in the gospels,

most of Jesus' ministry

took place in what is the miracle triangle,

right inside the tri-town area of Capernaum,

Bethsaida and Chorazin.

You can look down to the sea of Galilee from

the modern Chorazin ruins.

Chorazin was atop the highlands of the sea of Galilee,

only about two miles to the northwest of Capernaum.

With it's dark volcanic soil and south facing slope,

it warmed quickly with the spring sun,

and crops matured there well before others.

Chorazin produce had a head start at the markets  
every year.

Bethsaida was located at the Jordan river delta.

It was only a short walk to the north east from Capernaum,  
again about 2 miles.

Being the spot where the Jordan river enters the Sea of Galilee,  
it had the fertility of a delta for crops,  
fishing, and wildlife.

The disciples Peter, Andrew and Philip were from Bethsaida.

Capernaum was likely the larger of the three towns.

Right on the shore of the sea of Galilee,  
it would have been part of a fishing economy.

But Capernaum also had the all important trade road,  
the Via Maris, the 'way of the sea', running through it.

This ancient highway  
was the route for goods from the east.

Trade from from Assyria, and Damascus



would travel down around the sea of Galilee to the  
Mediterranean coast and Egypt.

Capernaum was the perfect spot for collecting duty, tax and tolls.  
It was from Capernaum that Jesus called the disciple Matthew  
the tax collector.

The people of these three towns saw and heard, or at least heard about  
almost every thing Jesus did and said.

They could literally walk over a few hundred metres  
to hear the sermon on the mount.

The people from these towns were the crowds Jesus fed.

They saw the paralyzed man healed.

The blind see.

The dead raised.

As a young teen my thinking went,

“How I would wish that I could have been there with them.

‘Back then, faith would be easy.’”

But faith does not always come easy.

Even if you are right in the Bible story.

When you read the whole of chapter 11 of Matthew,

Matthew shows us faith does not always come easy. Period.

It is just before today's passage

in the beginning of chapter 11,

that John the Baptist himself,

this cousin of Jesus who grew up

hearing his mother Elizabeth

and his cousin Mary telling the story over and over again,

of his and Jesus' remarkable births...

John the Baptist himself, the popular teacher,

the one to whom crowds flocked out of Jerusalem,

the one who had himself baptized Jesus,

the one who had pointed to Jesus and said,

"The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

the one who was in the Jordan with Jesus

when the voice came from heaven and said to Jesus

"You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

This John the Baptist,  
after years of hearing about Jesus' ministry,  
but now imprisoned himself,  
sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus,  
'Are you the one who was to come,  
or should we expect someone else?'

Even John the Baptist had to ask.

'Are you the one – or should we expect someone else?'

'Are you the one?'

Faith does not always come easy.

It makes me feel less like a faith failure for those times I ask it myself.

'Are you the one Jesus?'

Faith doesn't always come easy.

But you are not the only one for whom this is true.

So don't think its just weakness on your part.

Jesus said to the messengers John the baptist sent to him,

'Go back and tell him,

the blind receive sight, the lame walk,  
those who have leprosy are cured,  
the deaf hear, the dead are raised,  
and the good news is preached to the poor.

Blessed is the one  
who does not fall away on account of me.'

Jesus' words to John the Baptist are an echo of the prophecy in Isaiah 61

which begins 'The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me.'

It was Jesus way of saying,

let my deeds show you how the prophecy is fulfilled in me.

But the Lord knows,

faith does not come easy.

Jesus asked the crowd who were there overhearing John's question,

'When John was out there in the desert,

well what did you go to the desert to see?'

A reed swayed by the wind?

A man dressed in finery?

You went to see a prophet.

And if you have eyes for it,  
you saw THE prophet,  
the one for whom you leave a spot  
at your seder meal at Passover,  
Elijah the prophet,  
forerunner to the Messiah.

That is who you saw in the desert,  
if you had the eyes to see it.

But faith does not always come easy

and Jesus diagnosed the problem for us.

He spoke to the crowd, and really to us too, when he said,

“To what can I compare this generation?

They are like children sitting in the marketplaces

and calling out to others:

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;

we sang a dirge and you did not mourn.”

John came neither eating nor drinking,

and they say, 'He has a demon.'

The Son of Man came eating and drinking,  
and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard,  
a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." "

What Jesus was saying about the kids,  
the children in the marketplace,  
can basically be summed up as,

'You won't play!' 'You won't engage or participate.'

We brought our ball for dodge ball,  
and you said no.

We brought our skipping ropes for jumping,  
and you said no.'

We played the flute. We sang a dirge.

You say no to everything.

You won't budge.

You refuse to move.

You are unmoved.

What exactly is it you are looking for out there in the faith desert?

John the Baptist didn't eat or drink – you didn't like him.

Jesus never said no to an invitation –

you call him a drunkard and glutton.

Then Jesus lets his anger run free with these towns,

with the people of Capernaum, Bethsaida and Korazin,

with these towns that have seen the most of Jesus' ministry,

heard the most of Jesus' teaching,

and yet haven't budged, have refused to move,

and have not repented,

which simply means turn around or turn back to God.

Woe to you Chorazin.

Woe to you Bethsaida.

If the miracles performed in you,

had been done over on the coast,

in Tyre and Sidon, with the Lebanese, with the Arabs

your long time rivals,

well, they would have repented long ago.

And Capernaum,

do you think you are going to get some special status,

that you'll be lifted to the skies?

You are going down to the depths!

I tell you,

if the miracles you have seen

had been done in Sodom,

yes that Old Testament Sodom that was so wicked that

God couldn't find ten righteous people for it to be spared,

yes that Sodom is going to be better off on judgment day

than you.

For if these miracles had been performed there,

Sodom would have been moved.

Sodom would have turned back, repented.”

I played the flute, but you wouldn't dance.

I brought the rope, but you wouldn't skip.

The blind receive sight,

the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured,

the deaf hear, the dead are raised,



and the good news is preached to the poor.

I have given you miracles and you are unmoved.

But you still ask the the question.

Are you the one,

or should we expect someone else?

What is it you are waiting to see?

Wish you could have been there?

That wasn't the answer for the residents of those three towns.

And you yourself are only one step away.

You can read the accounts.

There are four gospels put down to paper,

by people who were very close to Jesus,

and to the events and to the stories.

You are one step removed.

What is it you are waiting to see?

There are ordinary miracles everyday.

Wonders and blessings too many to count if you pay attention.

There are the countless examples  
all around the world,  
of the church picking up Jesus' mandate  
to carry on and fulfill his ministry,  
doing amazing, miraculous, sacrificial things in Jesus' name.

Most of you have one or two exceptional experiences,  
of wondering if the seemingly impossible could happen,  
then, being obedient, trusting God, and moving  
you've seen something that seemed beyond hope,  
come to be.

I bet if you asked, most of us could tell a,  
'I really don't have an explanation,  
of how or why this amazing thing happened' type of story.

So unusual we want to call it,  
but are scared to say it,  
a miracle.

The x-ray that is now clear  
and baffles the doctor.

The child now in your arms  
who was supposed to be impossible.

The money that came just in time.

The vision or dream that still brings you peace.

Jesus is still at work.

In his church, through his church, for his church.

He continues to overshadow everything.

Are you expecting another, someone else?

Faith does not always come easy.

But that is not our real problem.

Our real problem is our refusal to be moved, our refusal to budge

from our own stubborn arrogant position of thinking we know better.

Our greater problem is a refusal to turn back, to repent

and turn in humility to those times God has given you something,

shown you something,

graced you in some way, and remembering that,

honouring that, and trusting that.

Our real problem is to hear the stories of our neighbours in Capernaum,  
Bethsaida, and Chorazin, and like many of them, remain unmoved.

The real problem comes when God has given you

a sign, a signal, a push, a pull,

a sermon, a song, a need, a word, a chance,

and you don't budge,

and don't make a single move in your life of faith.

Then, you wonder why you haven't learned to trust God.

You've never given him a chance to prove himself to you.

You can be moved.

If you have been in church land long enough,

you will be familiar with a phrase called 'The Great Commission'

It is Jesus' command to his followers at the end of his ministry,

as he passes the baton for them to run with it.

'Go and make disciples of all nations.'

But there is something else equally as great in Matthew.

As equally great as the Great Commission.

The book of Matthew holds in it,  
the Great Invitation.

It is an invitation to stop the stubborn striving on our own  
and to be moved to rest and lean into  
'the one upon whom is the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord'.

Faith doesn't always come easy

Jesus said,

'Come to me you who are weary and burdened,  
and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,  
for I am gentle and humble in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

Jesus doesn't invite people to get their act together.

Jesus doesn't invite people to have it all figured out.

In difficult times,

not just pandemics, but all the other difficult times too,  
we can easily become rigid and unmovable  
in our anxiety, in our anger, in our mistrust.

But you have been there.

You have heard of the deeds of Jesus.

You have experienced the deeds of Jesus.

You have broken bread at the table.

You have stood at the foot of the cross.

You have looked in an empty tomb.

You know the story of the one who has overcome the world.

Let him overcome you too,

and move you

to turn back to Jesus and rest.

Take his yoke of love, grace, sacrifice and redemption on your shoulders

instead of the burden you are carrying,

and you will find rest for your soul.

Amen.