



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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Midweek Lenten Worship

Pastor Randy Ott

Crossroads – Traveling with Our Savior

When you get to certain places or certain events or certain things, you have certain expectations, don't you? If I go to the dentist, I expect to see my knuckles turn white sometime during the day. Even if the drilling doesn't hurt like it once did, my knuckles are still going to turn white. If I'm standing in this pulpit and I say "Grace and peace to you" and you sit down, you expect next to hear a Sermon. You don't expect me to do a tap dance or something else, right? You have an expectation.

Sometimes our expectations kind of get messed up, don't they? I don't know if it was last night on the news that showed the National Guard training in Neenah and the people that heard them on the radio and there was this fuss and this rigmarole about this and someone was interviewed on T.V. and said "They shouldn't be training for war; they should be training for peace"—or something to that effect. When did our expectations change for our military? I thought "military" means "training for battle." Isn't that why we have a military; to prepare for war? The very nature of having a military is to defend your country. But sometimes we can have our expectations all turned around.

As Jesus left Bethany the morning after Psalm Sunday and as he was traveling into Jerusalem, he had some expectations when he saw a fig tree, right? He expected some fruit. There wasn't any. So Jesus cursed the tree—not because he got up on the wrong side of the bed, but because he wanted to teach his disciples and also you and me something about the nature of faith. Notice the next day when Peter stands slack-jawed because the tree was withered from the roots that Jesus had cursed, and he points it out to Jesus as though it is some great surprise; Jesus answers Peter by saying "Have faith in God."

"Have faith in God." That is what our God tells us. As we consider the nature of faith, as Jesus teaches this on Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week, we see the nature of faith is that it believes the unbelievable and it also forgives the unforgivable. Those are amazing statements our God makes to us.

It believes the unbelievable. Think about what Jesus says after Peter stands there and points out this truth that this fig tree is withered. What Jesus said to it within 24 hours took place. "Never will anyone ever eat fruit from you again"—the next morning as it is withering, it's pretty obvious that Jesus' words are coming true. But Jesus says to them "Have faith in God." Then, if you can picture in your minds eye, they are coming from Bethany, which is located on the route that led into Jerusalem. But they are up on this

mountainside, a hill, and they are traveling along it to go in and up to Jerusalem. They are about 2,600 feet above sea level, and behind them in the distance is the Dead Sea. As they look down to the Dead Sea, that is 1,000 feet below sea level. Then Jesus speaks this unbelievable statement, "Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain"—where they are walking, and then he points to the south to the Dead Sea—"go throw yourself into the sea,"—and you can almost see him pointing to it, and this huge elevation difference and the idea of a mountain being moved down to that sea or something like that, that is unbelievable! But Jesus says "If anyone says to that mountain 'be thrown into the sea' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him." The nature of faith is to believe the unbelievable.

That is what our God tells us. To believe what our eyes say is unreasonable, what our mind says makes no sense. There is no physical way if you were standing there with the morning breeze hitting your cheeks that you could picture that mountain being thrown into that sea. Yet, God says there is the nature of faith—believe the unbelievable.

We know that definition of faith, right? Being sure of what you hope for, certain of what you can't see, believing the unbelievable fits hand in glove with that, and at times we will say "I believe God can perform a miracle. God could heal me if it is his will. Or God could do this or that if it is his will." There are times our faith soars to those heights. But sometimes in our day-to-day life we tend not to believe the unbelievable when it comes to our God.

Think of this example from congregational life. Every month you go down to your mailboxes and you pull out the Treasurer's Report and you look at the income and you look at the expenses and you see the operating debt. Without fail, sometime during every month someone comes and talks to me saying "what are we going to do" and "how can this ever be taken care of; this is much more than we could ever do." We don't seem to believe the unbelievable that God can work through people like you and me, as weak and crumbling as we are, to overcome something as simple as a budget deficit. Do we really believe God isn't powerful and active in us and through us in the gospel? Do we only believe the unbelievable when it comes to something else but not the day-to-day things? I have to admit that sometimes we do, don't we? We sometimes go through our lives and think that God is only in some of the extraordinary things but not in the daily things.

In our daily life, you and I can believe the unbelievable—that our God is with us; that he is strengthening us; and that he loves us in spite of who we are. Here is all the evidence you need that you can believe the unbelievable. The eyes of your faith see who you are. The eyes of my faith see who I am.

At the start of the service tonight, Silence for Self Examination, in considering your own sins, do you enjoy that? Do you look forward to that? Or do you kind of go to yourself "I wish he would get going. I'm tired of thinking what a sinner I am. I want to hear that I am forgiven. I don't want to think about my sins anymore."

You and I are weak. You and I seem to have nothing to offer our God and yet he loves us with such an intense love that he lived in our place and he died in our place. This is the unbelievable. God took away our sins. God was perfect where we are weak. God loves perfectly. God lived perfectly so that you and I would be forgiven where we have failed to. If you want to believe the unbelievable, that is the nature of Christian, right? I believe I am forgiven in Jesus Christ. I believe heaven is mine. That is unbelievable when I see what I am.

It has to be the same for you, but that is the nature of faith. Have faith in God. He loves you. He has forgiven you. That is why he says to us “Bring things to me in prayer and when you pray, don’t doubt that I can do anything. Don’t doubt that I want to help you in the little mundane things of day-to-day life. Don’t just wait until you think it is something major to flee to me in prayer. Pray to me about every single thing that troubles you, that worries you. Pray with thanksgiving” he tells us in Philippians so that we see that we can believe the unbelievable because he has done the unbelievable in our lives, but “Bring it all to me. Dump it all in my lap, and I am there for you.”

Now we pray believing that he can do whatever we ask him, but we also know that he is going to answer in his time and in his way. We aren’t always going to get a 24-hour answer like that tree got, right? That isn’t always going to happen. And he isn’t always going to say “yes,” because he knows better. That is the other “believe the unbelievable.” Believe that his answer is always the best possible answer. Faith believes, but faith also acts. Faith believes the unbelievable. That’s why we go and we, with confidence, pray to our God about any and every thing because he has told us to, but because we believe that he is that intimately concerned about every last area of our lives. There isn’t a whole lot in this lifetime that is cooler than that thought.

Our God also tells us that not only does faith act in prayer when it believes the unbelievable, but faith acts by forgiving the unforgivable because we believe the unbelievable. We believe we have been forgiven and faith, in laying hold of that forgiveness which Christ has won for us—not that faith plays any part in us being forgiven, it lays hold of what Christ has already done. It is the gift God gives to us that makes his forgiveness our own. But when faith has laid hold of that through God’s gift, faith then is intimately connected with having a forgiving spirit.

If you are standing there praying, if you hold anything against anyone—think about that phrase for a minute—anything against anyone—if you hold anything against anyone, what is excluded there? Who does God permit you to carry a grudge against? What can you still carry on your heart and be upset against someone else about? Anything against anyone—faith forgives the unforgivable.

There are a lot of things humanly speaking you and I would say are unforgivable. We have a lot of things we would like to put an asterisk behind that “anything,” right? This person has done this. This person has done that. They said this about my family. They did this to me and stabbed me in the back at work. I can’t get beyond that. But our God says to us faith that believes the unbelievable also forgives the unforgivable. If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him.

It's pretty straightforward. It's pretty simple. Our God tells us very directly what the nature of faith is. Faith imitates the object of our faith. Jesus forgave us unconditionally without any strings, without any clauses that we have to fulfill or demands that we have to fulfill. He forgave us unconditionally and now he says "as you carry my name as a little Christ, as you call yourself Christian, I will empower you so that you can forgive the unforgivable. So that you can do more than you think you can because that is the nature of faith." Faith leans on God and relies on God. His strength enables us to do what we think we can't.

The Law doesn't empower us to do that. Having him tell us what to do doesn't do that. The love he has given us in Christ enables us to believe the unbelievable and forgive the unforgivable, and we see that as we survey the wondrous cross!