

Good News for the Hard-Pressed

[John 12:9-19](#)

Good News for Those Who Digress

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Sunday, April 9, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us bow in prayer. While the celebration of your glory and kingship resounds, Lord Jesus Christ, we admit our doubts, our reservations, our hesitations about following you. So speak to us. Grant us courage, deepen our faith, as we hear the word that you speak to us, Lord Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

While faith wavers or recedes, even digresses to other important themes of life, grace stands. Jesus is Lord and King no matter what. We may lose our focus on God, but God never loses focus on us.

One Sunday morning in Bethlehem when I was the pastor of that church, I was to stand and give a very significant call to give because the church was struggling with finances and budget. It happens to all of us; I typically do not drink any alcohol on Saturday night for fear of what might happen on Sunday morning. I don't drink much alcohol anyway, in case you're concerned about that. However, this one Saturday night, there was a special event, a little party, and I had two glasses of wine. I did not sleep well that night, and the next morning I got up for the announcements to invite the congregation to give, and I lost all awareness of everything that was going on. I simply said, "The financial report is in the bulletin. Read it when you have time and give when you have the money."

I drank water and lemon last night.

There is a sense that we human beings have short focus. It is easy for us to be on this subject and to begin to think about another subject. We digress so easily. We have short attention spans, particularly in this culture today. We are open to the latest offer, or even the better offer. We are so easily led astray to another subject. A young woman came to visit one of our church events not too long ago. She had read that there were a number of kitchen utensils available at the women's bazaar, and she decided to come to get those utensils to be able to cook. A woman welcomed her at the door and ushered her through the process. When she said, "I'm looking for cooking utensils," this woman graciously walked her through and picked out all of the necessary kitchen cooking utensils she needed. It wasn't long after that that the woman invited her to come to church the next day, and said, "I will meet you at the door, and I will sit with you in worship." And so the young woman decided to come.

The next morning the young woman came to worship and was at the door, but the woman from church did not show up. However, by that time, the grace of God had taken over, and that young woman stayed in the church and heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. The message here is: when we can lose focus and forget to fulfill our commitments of faith, God is there to pick us up. Jesus never gives up on us. Our fickle faith is met with the strong grace of Jesus Christ.

Driving up the Potomac this morning, a glorious morning with the sun rising out over the monuments, the wonderful Potomac in stark blue, I heard over the radio the anthem from Felix Mendelssohn's Elijah: "He is watching over Israel, he slumbers not nor sleeps." While we may become diverted in our intention, while we may become distracted and our faith wavers, God never sleeps. God is always attending to us. Those who digress, who move aside, who lose their focus, who may even go another way, who turn away or fall away from faith, who become fickle or doubleminded, who fly apart or move apart because of distractions or frustrations -- God never gives up. Jesus never wavers. Jesus is Lord of lords and King of kings, no matter what we do with our faith.

This is the heart of the message of Palm Sunday. Jesus' approval rating was not built upon the opinion poll of the people who followed him on that Sunday. I'll bet presidents of the United States would have loved to be in that place. We can see that second terms for presidents are not happy terms for high

approval ratings. We get to know the president pretty well by that time, and we've pretty much decided what the flaws are. We often treat our spouses, our important people, our pastors, our leaders, our children the same way. We so easily lose interest in what primarily motivated us to follow them in the first place.

It's the second-term doldrums for Jesus. Jesus is in a pattern where the people follow him one day and turn away the next; follow him another day and turn away the next. The cycles of Jesus' approval rating are up-and-down, and up-and-down. In the early part of the gospel of John, Jesus turns water into wine, cleans house at the temple, tells a Samaritan woman things about herself that she had told no one, heals visible people, feeds 5,000 men, which is probably 20,000 women and children on top of that. Jesus even walks on water. He calls a lot of attention to himself, and people flock to him. Jesus is so overcome by the crowd that John says he realizes one day the crowd is about to take him by force to make him king, whether he wants to be king or not. Jesus turns to the crowd and says, "You're looking for me not because you saw the signs of my Messiahship, but because you ate your fill of food," and then turns to say, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but work for the food of eternal life. I am the bread of heaven." And then he says the hard statement: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." People turned and said, "You have a demon," and no longer followed him.

How quickly people who were crowded around him, trying to make him king, decided he was a demon and needed to be abandoned. This is the way of faith. And that's just not the only time it happens in the gospel. We see that there is another cycle that happens. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. That attracts a lot of attention. People flock to see this man who could raise someone from the dead, and the man who has been raised from the dead. They have a great banquet in Bethany for Lazarus and Jesus, and huge crowds show up. They want to see them and touch them. And they begin to think: if this man can raise people from the dead, he can surely conquer Rome. And so it is, with that great national spirit, that they begin to call out to Jesus that he is Messiah -- King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the one who will save them from Rome. Jesus' approval rating is at the top of the charts. And right at that point, it says in the gospel of John, that he departed and hid because he knew they were following him for the wrong reasons.

And it's not long after that that Jesus says they loved a human glory more than a glory that comes from God. The crowd abandons Jesus. Jesus is betrayed and denied, and deserted by his own disciples, and the crowd turns. When asked if they would like to have Jesus or Barabbas, the bandit, to be preserved out of prison, they ask for Barabbas. They say to Pilate about Jesus, "Crucify him! Lead him away. We have no king but the emperor of Rome." How quickly we digress.

It's hard to stay focused and consistent with our faith. If you came today and your faith is wavering, you are a normal human being, because that is the way all of us live. Our faith is up-and-down; our focus on Jesus has high moments and low moments. We fluctuate...oscillate... there's waxing and waning in our faith. We have an approach-avoidance relationship with Jesus. One of the reasons all of this happens is because our expectations of who Jesus is and what Jesus will do for us are misguided. Israel had a very strong sense the Messiah would not only rule Israel, but conquer Rome. And so the meaning of that parade on that Palm Sunday morning is a parade about the national interest of Israel. The palms represent the flag. It's a flag-waving July 4th event: "We have a savior who can make our country great." The singing is like the national anthem of Israel. It is an anthem which is understood to resonate to the depths of Israel's heart, to show that they are committed to the great nation of Israel to come back from the dead, and Jesus is going to be the one to raise them up. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" is their "Star-Spangled Banner."

The road of palms and songs, however, has a detour, because underneath all of that expectation, the people begin to have significant qualms about what Jesus is really going to do. It seems like Jesus isn't going to mobilize the troops after all. Jesus goes off and hides. That's a great frustration for us, because we want Jesus to do certain kinds of things. We want Jesus to bring success and make great nations. We want Jesus to make us economically powerful and politically strong. We have an agenda for Jesus, but Jesus does not have the same agenda. When we exercise those kinds of expectations, Jesus goes off and hides. When Jesus hides, we digress. "Well, if Jesus isn't going to do what I want to have Jesus do, if Jesus isn't going to make our nation great like we expect Jesus to make our nation great, then why bother with Jesus?"

The crowd cheers, but then turns to jeers. The crowd sings, but then starts yelling. The crowd affirms, but then turns and attacks. The crowd follows, but then falls away. The crowd makes progress in following Jesus and then digresses, off in their own world, losing faith. The popularity of Jesus leads to a kind of deep vulgarity in the crowd. The crowd is fickle.

I was with Lloyd Ogilvie at the 125th anniversary celebration of Bethlehem Presbyterian Church. Lloyd Ogilvie had been the pastor of that church in the 1960's. He had followed one of the greatest preachers of all time, noted to be one of the top ten preachers in the country. Lloyd, in comparison, was seen as much less than that. There were people who did not like the change of pastors. They moved from a faithful connection to the church, to a sense of digression away -- for the same persons could not have the same faith in a different kind of preacher. When I was sitting with Lloyd between worship services on that particular day, he told me the story of one particular couple in the church who had digressed. They had been so fascinated with Elam Davies that they could not stand Lloyd Ogilvie. They were critical. They attacked. At every chance they tried to undermine. They did damage. He almost left the church over it. And wouldn't it be just as God would have it, that that particular Sunday morning, after he'd preached the sermon, and he'd gone out, and there was a great celebration of Lloyd Ogilvie returning to the church, that the first couple to come up and shake his hands and cheer him on, was that very same couple who had tried to do him in.

How fickle we are with our commitments. "Oh, Lloyd, how much we missed you all these years." We do this with all sorts of leaders. On the one hand, we become passionate about some, and dispassionate about others. Our culture is so much built upon superficial connections to our assumptions, our needs, and our expectations. "If you can't give me what I need right now, I'm not interested, thank you." And that's how people treated Jesus. And I believe that's how we treat Jesus a lot of the time. "Oh, Jesus, I'll follow you as long as you feed me what I need. As long as you meet my needs, and you stroke my hair in such a way that I can purr in your presence." We're driven by popularity... celebrity... charisma... talent... beauty. We're driven by opinion and media. We're driven by a culture of narcissism that says, "If you meet my needs, I'll follow you."

But it's hard to keep the focus when we discover that God isn't here just to take care of us. It's hard to keep the focus when there's a lot of distractions around. I visited my stepfather-in-law recently after losing his wife (my wife's mother). He is in a retirement home in the nursing and special-care facility. I sat with him and looked him in the eye, and I said, "How are you doing?" He said, "I'm not doing well." He started crying. I said, "Well, do you have someone to talk to?" He said, "No." I said, "Do you have someone you can be with?" He said, "No." "Do you have something you can read or pay attention to?" And he said, "No. My eyes are not good enough to read. I can't watch television. The people around me are people that really can't talk to me because they've also lost focus." And so it is that he sits in that nursing facility without any ability to get focus, and think, and do what his mind is able to do. He is digressing from reality.

My sense is that we all are tempted to digress from reality when we can't get the focus, the help, and the support that we need to stay on the main thing. We fail Jesus; we lose faith because we feel that Jesus has failed us and left us alone, abandoned us. And so we just give up hope. Our faith is flawed. But here's the good news, and it is significant good news: when we lose focus, when we digress, Jesus, the Lord, is present by grace that does not give up on us when we give up on God. Our disillusionment, our disappointment, our despair is overturned by the grace of God. Jesus is not Messiah because of popular demand, because of celebrity status, or majority vote, or Gallup poll. Jesus is Lord because God has made Jesus Lord. Jesus is Messiah by the will of God, by the word of God, by the mercy, grace, and love of God. There is nothing that can change that, no matter how we feel about it. And our feelings will change. The good news is: Jesus is Messiah even when everyone has given up on him. Even when the crowd has turned away and the disciples have abandoned him, Jesus is still Messiah. Jesus is Messiah on the cross when he is totally alone and he says, "Lord, Father, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus is still Messiah when all have left.

The good news is that, even though our faith wavers, the grace of God stands, solemnly and deeply, in the love that Jesus has for the world. Jesus' eternal leadership is not dependent upon our agreement or our acknowledgement. We can reject, and crucify, and sell Jesus out. But Jesus will still seek us, call us, serve

us, heal us, and die for us when we have turned away. This is the message of Palm Sunday. Jesus seeks us out even when we run away. Jesus fishes after Peter, after Peter goes fishing. Jesus pursues us even when we avoid him. God pursues Cain even when Cain wanders from God. If you walk away, Jesus will come after you. If you turn away, Jesus will turn toward you. If you abandon God, God will not abandon you.

The 40th high-school reunion of my graduating class happened last weekend, and I was there. I was invited by two of my friends; when I got there, I discovered that neither one of them showed up. How fickle we are. Well, not to worry; I was invited to sit at a table with all of the old a capella choir members that were there, and there was a large number of us. We began to reflect upon those adolescent days when we were so up-and-down, and fickle, emotionally-driven, and out of touch with reality, and in chaos most of the time. We realized that this man who had directed our choir was as solid as rock. And one of the reasons we were all gathered around that table is because he was able to capture our attention, keep our attention, and have grace toward us, even when we were so faithless toward him. Mr. Gus became for us, the image of Jesus at that table.

I hope today that you see that Jesus will not give up on you, even when you turn away from him. This is the good news of Jesus Christ: when you digress, the grace of God will never let you go. Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, help us now to hear your powerful voice, the Spirit that reaches out to us, that ties us into you. Hold onto us, even when we are tempted to let go. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.