

Un-Certain Sermon Series  
When God Lets You Down – Ecclesiastes 1  
Sept. 18, 2022  
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Have you ever been so certain about something and then learned it wasn't true? That happens to me about once a week. I shared one of those stories during last week's sermon with the help of my wife Amy, and since then I'm not so certain I'm the best preacher in the family. I can't tell you how many people said to me this week that they were looking forward to Amy's sermon this Sunday.

Here's another one. I grew up in the Louisville area and became a baseball fan at an early age, so I've been making trips to Cincinnati for over 40 years. Reds games at Riverfront and Great American, concerts at Bogart's and the Taft, visiting the museums and the zoo, and, of course, the required youth group trips to King's Island and Perfect North. I'm almost embarrassed to admit to you that, up until about a year ago, I had assumed that, because Lexington is in the middle of Kentucky and you drive straight north, that Cincy was in the middle of the bottom of Ohio. Now, look, I've seen a map before, and I know Kentucky and Ohio and Indiana all meet right there. But geographically, in my mind, that didn't compute. So one day I was looking at a map and noticed that Cincy is in the southwest corner of Ohio and it blew my mind! Now, every time I look at a map, I stare at Ohio and say, "Huh! How about that?"

Now, realizing Cincinnati isn't where I thought God put it hasn't made me question everything I believe. But there are other realizations we have can shock us so much that we wonder if the rock-solid assumptions on which we've built our faith are actually shifting sand. In this sermon series, we're looking at the role of doubt and uncertainty in our faith. Last week, we said that our goal isn't a strong faith, but a real one that includes room for uncertainty. Today, we're going to see what happens when God doesn't live up to God's promises.

That happens most often in the Hebrew Scriptures, what some folks call the Old Testament. That part of the Bible is full of promises from God, promises of protection and provision and abundance, and it contains characters who believe in those promises. I think about Abraham and Sarah, who were told by God to pack and leave their home without knowing where they were going. And then there's Moses, who was told by God through a burning bush that he was going to take on the mighty Pharaoh and free the Israelites from slavery. Or Noah, God bless him, who was told to build a cruise ship while the sun was shining because it was going to rain. And the crazy thing? He did it!

Why did those people go against conventional wisdom and follow God? Because God makes some potent promises. Psalm 121 says, "The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life." Or Isaiah 41: "So do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Or Joshua 1: "This is my command-be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Those are great, aren't they? They make me think I can take on a giant with a slingshot or walk into a den full of lions. I know people who have leaned into God's promises during difficult times and been delivered from financial difficulty or illness or loneliness. God is good, right?

Well...what about those times when God's promises weren't fulfilled? Is it OK to talk about those? You know, those times when God didn't keep us from evil, or when God

didn't uphold us and we fell into depression, or when it felt like God was anywhere but with us. Psalm 121 says that God will not let your foot slip. Where was God when I fell off my bike in front of a crowd of people at West Sixth Brewery a couple weeks ago. Could have really used you there, God! I saw a church sign that said, "If you feel like God is far away, who do you think moved?" And I wanted to say, "God! I'm still right here, stuck in the middle of this mess. I haven't gone anywhere, but God feels a million miles away."

If only the Bible had something to say about those times when God lets us down, right? Well, meet the author of Ecclesiastes. Listen to what he says in the first few verses: "All things are wearisome, more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them," Dude, go pet a puppy or something, that's way too heavy. And yet, it's in the Bible.

Last week, we looked at Proverbs 3 as a reminder to trust in God, because as verse 6 says, "God will make your paths straight." And yet Ecclesiastes says in v. 15, "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted." That doesn't sound like someone with a strong faith. It sounds like someone with a real faith, someone who has faced doubt and disappointment, someone who's writing in the middle of a life tornado, when things haven't worked out and God hasn't put a tidy little bow on the problem. It may not be perfect faith, but it's honest, but I can relate to it a whole lot more than the idea that God magically fixes everything.

We've all been there, right? Haven't we all come to a point in our lives when, as author Peter Enns says, "our lives are in deep pit of blah, where we are completely alone, our best friends are grief and depression, and God is the reason why?" I remember visiting with a woman whose mother was in the last days of a very difficult and stressful health journey. The woman had been so busy taking care of her mom that she hadn't started the grieving process. I told her it was OK to pause, to be still, to feel the strong emotions building up inside her. She looked at me and said so much pain, "I can't start crying because I'm afraid I'll never stop." I don't think she felt God was holding her close in that moment.

Those passages that express this kind of raw disappointment with God are called counter testimony, and they are an important part of the biblical narrative, because feeling abandoned by God is a part of real faith. We worship a God who is not beholden to our thinking, a God who does not act according to our sense of certainty, even if we can find a Bible verse or two to post on Facebook or crochet on a pillow. Sooner or later, we all find ourselves dealing with some serious challenge to what we think about God when faced with the capricious unfairness of life.

So, what do we do when we're there? A lot of people give up on God because they feel God has let them down. But I wonder if some fault lies in how they've been taught that God works. Too many people approach the Bible as a Christian owner's manual. I cringe at the trite statement that Bible stands for "basic instructions before leaving earth." That may be a small part of the Bible, but if we treat it as instructions, that means if we follow the right steps we get what we want in the end. If I'm using instructions to put together a desk and I follow those instructions, then in the end I'll have a desk. And if you're an expert like me, you'll even have several parts left over. That's efficiency!

That's not how the Bible works. It doesn't say, "Say a prayer here and give an offering there and God's promises will all come true and you'll live happily ever after." If that's the

approach you take, if you live with certainty that you know how God works, then you're setting yourself up for major disappointment. A faith that requires us to hold onto what we know is inadequate for handling the peaks and valleys of life. I think of people who've been told if they just pray harder or have more faith, their problems will go away. I'm not so sure about that, but I know a lot of good, faithful Christians who've been helped as much by therapists and Prozac as they have by prayer and Bible reading. There's a reason God gave us all those things.

So what do you do when God lets you down, when evil seems to be winning, when the challenges of life seem to render faith obsolete? You keep believing. That sounds like something a pastor would say, doesn't it? Just keep believing. And yet, I believe that's what a real faith does. It asks questions, it doubts, it cries, it rails against God, but it never stops believing that God is at work. In Psalm 73, the writer complains and laments about life for 14 verses, and then says, "I thought this was all pointless until I went into the sanctuary, and then I understood." Even in the midst of his most challenging times, he still worshipped. He moved toward God and found that God was still there.

How can you move toward God today? What would it look like to keep trusting, even when all the evidence points against it? How can you witness to God's goodness even when you aren't feeling it? I think about the disciples of Jesus, who literally watched their leader die on a cross, a sword piercing his side to prove he was dead. They had every reason to doubt all of God's promises, to conclude that this whole faith thing was a farce. And yet, they trusted anyway, and because they did, they experienced the joy of resurrection.

I can't promise you God is going to make everything all right. Life is not a sitcom. But I wonder if we can use our dark times to drown out the noise around us and focus in on the voice of God, which can guide us through whatever we're going through. There are no easy answers there. Faith is not a crutch. Instead, it's radical trust that God has not abandoned us, that God has not forgotten us, that God will make our paths straight. Look, trust is not for the weak. It's really, really difficult option, especially if you feel God has let you down. But it is the only option, and God has proven to be worthy of it. What feels like darkness now may be the incubator for resurrection. That might not happen today. Might not happen tomorrow. But we know that God rolls away stones. We know that God frees captives. We know that God conquers evil and death. So, we trust, not in what we think we know, but in who we know God is. Life can be really hard. But I believe God is bigger than any challenge we face. No, I don't just believe in God. I trust in God. Do you?