

Our God Doesn't Do Maintenance 2021
Isaiah 55:6-11 Ephesians 3:14-21

Isaiah 55:6-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Ephesians 3:14-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

**So in your opinion, are the best days of 1st Presbyterian Church
sometime in the past or yet to come in the future days ahead?**

As a church and as a congregation,
what do you suppose God might want to accomplish through us?

Do you believe that according to God's will and purpose,
that God will provide the ways and means, the resources and talents,
and whatever else is necessary for our church to accomplish
new and extraordinary things that truly make a difference?

When I moderated the Div. for Church Development at my former Presb.,
I met with the Session of a small African-American congregation,
that has once been a church of former slaves in Wilmington, NC.

They were a struggling and aging congregation in sharp decline,
with a historic but broken-down and neglected church building.

Because of their dire situation and their tight finances,
they were requesting permission from the Presbytery
to call a pastor and pay less than the Presbytery minimum.

After they explained how hard they were working just to survive,
I said to them,
"Sorry, but I don't believe that God wants you to survive!"

There was an immediate stunned and tense silence,
with some very angry expressions of shocked disbelief,
for how could someone even think or say such a thing?

Then I continued, "I don't think God ever wants us to just survive,
for our God who calls and equips, has promised always to provide
for the Church of Jesus Christ to do mission, to serve & thrive
and never, not ever, just barely survive.

Our God doesn't do maintenance. Our God does fruitful abundance.

Then I suggested to the elders and to the church members present,
"Surely God has something more in mind for you than mere survival.
Surely in the city of Wilmington there ought to be an exciting,
thriving and vibrant African-American Presbyterian church.

So instead of looking for ways to cut back and trim your expenses,
how about if the Presbytery helps fund a good and gifted pastor,
and we work together toward getting on track with your mission?

"Surely God has something more in mind for you than mere survival!"

Then I explained that their real problem was not that they were
an aging congregation unable to attract younger new members,
and in addition, their problem was not really
a lack of money and resources, or even inadequate facilities.

It was none of those external and visibly obvious things.

Actually, it's really a vision problem. Disappointments of the past,
discouragement & defeat had damaged their **vision of expectant hope**
and they were just not dreaming large enough dreams.

Confronted and overwhelmed by troubles, losses and difficulties,
too often we get discouraged & start thinking/believing too small.
When challenged by impossible circumstances and adversity,
in our fear & panic, we just don't see a large enough vision.

**We don't factor in God's power & promises into our life's equations,
and we allow defeat & disappointment to crush & stifle our joy & hope.**

How often churches in fear have abandoned courage and confidence,
and so surrendered, gave up and settled for far less than
the full abundance of God's rich promises and blessings?

To let our dreams and our sense of vision shrink or grow stale,
is to choose and accept in life **a state of spiritual denial---**

- as if God's promises and power cannot really be trusted
- as if the God who loves us, would ever abandoned us
- as if Almighty God were not still capable and fully in charge,
and up to something grand, magnificent and intentional,
if we'll open our eyes and hearts enough to perceive.

It is idolatry if we put more trust in the things we see of this world,
and in the power of the problems and troubles we're facing,
rather than in prayer, God's word and the promises of the Lord.

**It is idolatry if we submit the fear and doubts of this world
more than we trust in the authority, wisdom and promises of God.**

Authentic Christian faith isn't a focus on just the outward stuff.

It's the presence and power of God bubbling up from the inside.

Our problem is that we can get so focused on and locked onto externals that we miss or ignore the more important, the Holy Spirit present within.

For example, in getting ready to come to worship today,
 did you put more time & effort on preparing your outward appearance,
 or on preparing your heart and spirit for worship? ...
 ... did you pause to pray
 to be open and capable of receiving the Lord's blessings today?,
 or pray for those who are struggling and discouraged,
 desperate to receive some much needed healing & hope?

The passage we read earlier from Ephesians
 follows a section about the wonder and glory of God's grace
and how that gift and blessing can change everything.

In these verses,
 Paul is praying that the Christians in Ephesus will recognize
the full measure of all that God has and intends for them...

...and as he thinks about all that God is doing in and through the Church
 he finds himself caught up in heartfelt praise, worship and joy.

vs. 14-15

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.

And as Paul contemplates God's gracious love and blessings,
 wonder and awe flow over him **in a crescendo of hope and joy** ... vs. 16-17

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in **your inner being** with power through his Spirit, and that **Christ may dwell in your hearts** through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

In the original Greek, this is all one long complicated sentence,
 and the words "you" and "your" are specifically plural.
 So they are not referring to the individual believer,
 but to the whole Church family, the gathered body...

... that (all of) you may be strengthened, and that Christ may dwell in (all) your hearts, as (all of) you are being rooted and grounded in love, through his Spirit.

Paul is saying that the presence of the Holy Spirit
 is the Church's true hope, guidance, strength and power
 so that we are rooted and grounded in God's gracious love
which makes all the difference as we come together in Christ...

... for when faithful believers are gathered in Christ,
 incredibly powerful and wonderful things can happen,
 as we become more than just our own selves, and
 able to serve wherever the Lord has placed us.

His prayer is that they set their roots deep in Jesus Christ,
 for if they realized the **astonishing depth of God's love**
 that would change and drive, inspire and redirect
 every aspect and detail of their lives and living ...
 ... for if the foundation is built right, then everything else,
 directed by God's grace and power, will fall right into place.

But what does that mean and how does that really work?

First, we and our faith are strengthened and sustained
by the witness and presence of a gathering of believers
with whom we worship, fellowship, grow and serve together.

In a mystical and practical way **other Christians enhance our faith,**
and we have a responsibility to them as well to be present
and connected for our shared journey of spiritual growth.

Second, when we gather as the body of Christ, the Holy Spirit
is present among us differently than when we are all alone,
as the Spirit speaks to us through word and sacrament, strengthening
us to take the Gospel out into the world.

Paul continues, vs. 18-19

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and
height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the
fullness of God.

This isn't saying that Christ's love can be measured or explained,
but it's a prayer that the Church will recognize and appreciate
the infinite reach and power of God's grace in all directions.

**It comes down to one simple question, "Do I really trust God?" ...
... or am I trying to hang-on to the illusion that I am in control?**

To be honest about it,

**I don't always like or welcome the opportunities
God gives me to grow deeper, more faithful and trusting,**
since difficulties are how we live and grow into grace...

... for as God explained through the prophet Isaiah, vs. 8-9

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are
higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The Ephesians passage builds on that same assurance
of the sovereign power of the Lord to bring healing & hope. vs. 20-21

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all
we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

When we face a difficult situation or overwhelming trouble,
when we mean to be faithful but are fearful
and when the deck is clearly stacked against us ...

**... what do we really believe about trusting God's love,
God's power, God's presence, and God's promises?**

**Sometimes we envision a God far too small and far too distant,
uninvolved and not big enough to embrace and govern our world
and not close enough to touch and heal our lives
in a powerfully personal and meaningful way.**

For if our God can only watch or is off somewhere far in the distance,
then that is far less than the God described in Ephesians,
who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

The true God, the God Scripture is vastly beyond human explanation,
mysterious, powerful and wonderful beyond our imagining.
**shining with such dazzling glory that it fills every shadowy
corner of our hearts and of the universe with joyful hope.**

The God of Scripture offers endless love, blessings and grace
to fill us up when we are empty, to strengthen us when we are weak
and to encourage us when we are fearful, doubtful or anxious...
**... whose grace and truth keeps us rooted and grounded in love,
even when everything else is moving, shaking, and in flux.**

Our call and challenge?

What do we really believe, and do we really trust God's love?

After that meeting with the Chestnut Street Presbyterian Church,
our Division of Presbytery provided sufficient funds and help
for them to call a very fine, energetic and dynamic new pastor,
whose ideas, hope & optimism transformed that congregation.
He & I shared many meals talking about the great things God was doing.

When I checked out their website this week, clearly they're thriving,
and together they've been able to accomplish some wonderful things,
far more and way better than any of us ever thought possible.

I believe we too need to start dreaming bigger and better dreams,
for this is an incredible church, so many gifts and blessings,
and I am convinced there is nothing that we cannot do,
nothing that is too big for us to tackle and resolve,
for there's so much potential, so much that we can do.

Today, right now we are in transition toward whatever comes next,
and it is truly an amazing and wonderful **gift and blessing** ----
- that we cannot simply return to what was,
or back to what we were doing before Covid...

... our situation and the needs of our community have changed,
and so we are forced to rebuild and live into something different,
which calls us to re-examine our priorities & assumptions,
and find new ways to fulfill our mission and God's call.

We are heading into an exciting time that may be difficult & demanding
and yet by God's grace & purpose we are where God intends for us to be
equipped and enabled to serve well, to follow as the Lord leads.

Personally,

I can't wait to see what comes next, and what the Lord is building.
We are indeed fortunate, that we can share and participate
in whatever it is that God has planned, arranged & intends for us.
We've been entrusted
with a most remarkable and wide-open opportunity,

a community and culture all around us
that's in desperate need for a good reason to believe and to hope,
and a deep hunger for something in life upon which to build...
... and isn't that the Good News we're called to proclaim?

And since I am still breathing, and I think most of you are as well,
it is therefore, abundantly clear that God's not done with us yet.

I like the hopeful way vs. 20-21 are paraphrased in *The Message*,

God can do anything you know - far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest
dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, **his Spirit deeply and gently within us.**