

**Detail:**

“Horton Hatches the Egg” Originally 8-7-16 Sermon

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Ah, faithfulness. Our hymnal is full of songs about faithfulness. Scripture overflows with admonitions about faithfulness - the word “faithful” comes up 391 times in a Bible search for that word in the Common English Bible. In fact, Scripture talks about faithfulness in 4 different ways: as an attribute of God; as a positive characteristic in some people; as lacking in other people; and as a gift from the Holy Spirit.

Today we consider the further adventures of Horton the Elephant. A couple weeks ago, in our first message in this series on “Horton Hears a Who,” I shared with you the idea that Horton is often a God-figure in Dr. Seuss’ stories, and that remains the case in today’s story. In the face of all sorts of challenges and difficulties, Horton remains faithful, “one hundred percent.”

>>>GO TO “FAITHFULNESS” SLIDE<<<

So, here’s a question for you to ponder. If the Bible speaks so highly of faithfulness, if it’s a gift from the Holy Spirit, something to be desired and sought after, then when is it *not* good to be faithful?

Well, when you’re faithful to something or someone bad, or evil, would be one place. Faithfulness to an evil ideology would not necessarily be a good thing would it? How about in the church? When could “faithfulness” in the church not be a good thing? How about when your “faithfulness” to the church goes to the extreme to the point that you ignore other important things, like your family, or

your health? Or when you become, as they say, so “heavenly minded” that you’re “no earthly good.”

It’s one thing to claim, as the hymn says, “he leadeth me, he leadeth me, his faithful follower I will be,” if we’re following Jesus Christ, but many a so-called “good Nazi” said much the same kind of thing about following Hitler during World War II didn’t they? So blind faithfulness, or misplaced faithfulness is not necessarily a good thing, not a positive attribute, and certainly not a gift of the Holy Spirit.

>>>GO TO “PERSECUTIONS” SLIDE<<<

1 Peter was written to the Hortons of the world - that is, people trying to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ but who were facing difficulties, even persecution. The persecution was sanctioned by the Roman emperor - maybe the infamous Nero, or perhaps Domitian, another ruthless dictator. Or it might have been an unofficial kind of persecution, rising from a base of hatred, misunderstanding, or xenophobia or even a fear of change.

The persecution was widespread and brutal, and was aimed at people who no longer followed the party line of the Caesars, or of the Temple elite. It was aimed at those in the minority who refused to conform to the cultic, moral, and ethical norms and standards of the society in which they lived. These were a different sort of people - these rebels and malcontents who wouldn’t go along - because they received their hope through the resurrection of their leader, Jesus of Nazareth, after his death.

>>>GO TO “1 PETER” SLIDE<<<

So the author of the letter called 1 Peter wrote this to give encouragement and consolation to remain faithful, declaring that this was the “true grace of God.”

It was good news and encouragement in a time of testing; good news that is given to us today as well.

Faithfulness to Jesus’ teachings, and in our practice and our commitments, is one of the most difficult challenges we face as Christians, especially when doing so leads to frustration, or pain, or embarrassment - and especially when it leads to persecution.

There are times when standing by our faith, standing up for what Jesus said we were to do and to be as his followers is really tough, a very stiff challenge, just as it was for Horton in our story. We face tests - both internal and external - that though they may eventually strengthen us, also wear us down. Often these challenges to our faith come in subtle, unexpected ways. Jesus’ words to “love our enemies” lures us into a false sense of self-righteousness when we try to claim we have no enemies, but then either publicly or privately dehumanize someone because of their faith, their gender, their race, their sexual orientation, their politics or their nationality. The same is true when we just “go along to get along,” when others make disparaging remarks about someone else, and we give our tacit approval or agreement with their harmful words with our silence.

>>>GO TO “MLK” SLIDE<<<

In his book “Why We Can’t Wait,” Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr - in the chapter titled “Letters from a Birmingham Jail” - addressed those who claimed to be faithful clergy but who supported a policy of

“moderation” in dealing with race relations and civil rights, and who publicly opposed the Birmingham sit-ins and marches in the spring of 1963. King pointed out that it’s not always the KKK or some other blatantly oppressive group that stands in the way of freedom and justice.

Often it’s the moderate clergy who stand in the way, the so-called faithful who profess concern and commitment but who maintain that the time is not yet right for justice - as though there’s a “wrong” time for justice.

They are people who, well couched in their own level of privilege, insist on waiting for the proper season, but people under whose guidance the right time and the proper season never seem to arrive.

King wrote, “**Shallow** understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute **misunderstanding** from people of ill will. **Lukewarm acceptance** is much more bewildering than **outright rejection.**” Moderation can be deceptive.

The English conservative philosopher Edmund Burke is quoted as saying, “*the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*” In fact, lukewarm faithfulness may not be faithfulness at all. Had Horton been only “lukewarm” in his faithfulness, moderately living into the commitment he made, we’d have a VERY different story than the one we read.

If we, like Horton, are to remain 100% faithful, we must be prepared not only to endure ridicule, but also to take action when the cause is right and just, even sometimes when our reputations, safety, and comfort level are at risk.

>>>GO TO “DIDN’T SEE THAT COMING” SLIDE<<<

Faithfulness can be a lonely road, however. We need Peter’s encouragement, especially since our lives often take surprising, unexpected twists and turns - things happen that we don’t expect. Many of the stories by the author known as O. Henry, including *The Gift of the Magi*, *The Cop and the Anthem*, and *The Last Leaf*, include unexpected twists that the reader doesn’t see coming. The penniless man who tries to get arrested so he can spend the winter in a warm jail cell. Unsuccessful, he decides to go straight and is promptly arrested for loitering and given three months in jail. Or the last ivy leaf on a wall turns out to be artificial, having been painted by an aging artist to preserve the hope of a sickly young girl who looked upon the ivy for hope. Time and time again O. Henry breaks through the readers’ expectations to provide surprise conclusions and unexpected twists.

>>>GO TO “WHEN GOD BREAKS THROUGH” SLIDE

And that’s what we find throughout the Bible as well. Again and again, whether in the midst of persecution or mired in despair, God breaks through in unexpected places, in unexpected ways, providing a twist that gives us the strength for perseverance, or the path for faithful obedience. Think about it:

- Facing old age and no heir, Abraham and Sarah are met by a triumphant twist: a child named Isaac, a name which means “laughter,” is born!
- Caught between the sea and Pharaoh’s army, the people of Israel watch as the waters are parted before them and they pass through the sea to freedom. NOBODY saw that coming!

- A Jewish rabbi and healer is executed on a cross alongside criminals for claiming to be the Son of God - betrayed and denied by his own followers. Three days later he's resurrected! And even though he told them it would happen - they didn't really expect it to be so - NO WAY!

It's in these and other biblical stories that we find true grounds for our faithfulness and future hope.

The same message found in 1 Peter - to remain faithful even in the face of persecution - applies to us today.

As Peter says of the unexpected twist of Jesus' resurrection, it has "given us a new birth into a living hope." And he continues, "Rejoice in this, even if you have to suffer for a little while, so that the genuineness of your faith may be found to result in praise and honor and glory when Jesus Christ is revealed."

>>>GO TO "GOD IS FAITHFUL" SLIDE<<<

This is the good news: God acted in faith in the past, God is acting in faith in the present, and God will continue to act in faith in the future, to bring hope and new life. The God of grace and mercy, the God of love and life, continues to reveal God's self; in the baptism of a little child, in communion around the table; and in the ongoing fight for justice for all God's children.

If we are on the side of justice when it is called for, now, and not simply when it's convenient, then we will both experience and help bring about the grace of God and the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

That is faithfulness.

At the end of Horton's story, the lazy bird Mayzie discovers Horton at the circus and wants to reclaim the egg, even though Horton has sat on it faithfully for 51 weeks. In all the commotion, the egg hatches and out comes, not a bird, but a small elephant with wings; a sort of baby Horton - Horton's reward for his faithfulness. Like Horton, our God is faithful "one hundred percent!" And when we, like Horton, remain true to our word,

true to our vows as members of Christ's church,

true to our commitment to do Christ's work,

and faithful to the end, we too shall reap our reward -

on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.