

## **Sermon 19b 2021: Faith Matters and Makes a Difference for Life**

### **Introduction: A People and Persons on a Mission**

We are a church and individuals on a mission;

A mission to know God in Jesus Christ and to make Christ known to others;

We hear that's our mission Sunday after Sunday at announcements;

And publish it on our website and messages;

To help us keep our focus on this fabulous life God is calling us to live.

And since this is a broad or all-encompassing mission, we choose a theme or a focus each year;

To help us learn and pay attention to some important aspect of the Christian life.

One of my favorites was the year we lived into our mission by focusing on *Fearlessness*;

We chose this as the theme because fear is the opposite of faith;

We might have thought doubt was the opposite, but it is living afraid;

Fear keeps us from becoming our best selves and God is the antidote.

The odd thing about that good theme, for our family and our community, of course;

Is that that was the year the Allen family survived a plan crash in Alaska;

And living fearlessly was tested just a little bit.

Some of the themes have fallen a little flat or didn't quite connect as well as other themes;

Like the year we were *Living like Jesus*;

The year of learning and living into Jesus' balance in life of prayer and action;

It fell flat for some people as too hard, as impossible;

People told me they couldn't do that or that it wasn't really fair;

Because Jesus is also God, after all, and had an advantage of us.

In 2001, as we all struggled with the hateful and devastating events of September 11, 2001;

And the heartbreaking losses and changes that still affect us today;  
Which we remembered and prayed over on Saturday;  
Our theme was Christian Service and didn't we need that focus and reminder;  
To love one another and to build a more loving world.

When COVID hit in March of 2020, we were in the midst of a year of *A Community for the World*  
And wasn't that a Godly irony when we couldn't be together physically in community;  
So God kept us together spiritually through prayer and technology  
And we began to reach people outside our buildings across the country  
And into several countries around the world –  
Still don't know who the families in Indonesia are.

This year we have a new focus or theme to help us living into our mission;  
This year our theme is *Faith Matters*.

Faith is at the very core of our lives in God;  
Faith involves trust;  
Faith involves believing or giving our hearts, our lives over to God;  
Faith involves living in God's vision, even when we can't see quite where we're going;  
Faith opens the way for God to come into our lives in deeper and deeper ways;  
And faith unleashes God's power to bring hope and healing, peace and purpose and love.

Our commitment to *Faith Matters* this year has three important components:  
First we're going to learn and renew our understanding of the Christian faith;  
What Christianity is and what it means for our lives and for the life of the world.

Second, we're going to explore ways in which we can live by our faith day by day by day;  
Remembering that we are not in this life on our own;

But have been invited to allow God to empower and enrich our lives;

Because it is a matter of faith.

Finally, and this is a challenging part of the mission we're on for so many of us;

We're going to focus on how we share our faith with others, by our deeds and our words;

So that others may come to know the life of faith and the grace and goodness it brings.

I know of no greater life to live than the life that is adorned by a living faith;

And the hope and peace and confidence and vision God brings to our lives;

When our faith matters.

### **The Gospel and Faith Matters – Teaching and Living**

The Gospel for today teaches us about our faith as Christians, some facts we believe;

And the quality of life Jesus is calling us to live by faith.

Jesus is with his little band of followers and a crowd that is so often around him;

In a city called Caesarea Philippi.

Caesarea Philippi is in the northern part of the Galilee, on the border of Israel and Syria;

It's an important city as we hear by its name which includes the title Caesar or Emperor;

And a center of Roman political, commercial and religious power.

For country people like Jesus and His first followers it would be like coming from the country;

Into Center City Philadelphia with all its tall buildings and large parks;

Representing the power of this age: banking, business, government

And all varieties of religious practices;

It would have been awe inspiring.

In this setting of worldly power, Jesus asks His followers, “Who do people say that I am?”  
As though He’s challenging them in the midst of all this money, power and religion  
To make a statement about their faith.

They respond with the names of other religious authorities, John the Baptist, Elijah;  
Someone like the famous prophets of old and then He asks them the question  
That gets to the very heart of the Christian faith, “Who do you say that I am?”  
Peter, always ready with a quick answer says, “You are the Messiah.”

Now Peter and almost all of the people of their day had a vision of who this Messiah,  
This anointed one, this savior was going to be and that was a king;  
Someone who would kick out the Romans, and establish a physical kingdom;  
Like a King David or a King Solomon.

Knowing this as the commonly held view of the Messiah, Jesus begins to teach them and us;  
That their faith will not be in some earthly king, interested only in physical things;  
But in a Savior who will take away their sins, break the fear and finality of death;  
And establish a kingdom of the heart;  
Where God reigns in us and through us.

It’s not what Peter and Jesus’ followers probably wanted to hear and certainly didn’t understand;  
So Peter pushes back only to be rebuked by Jesus that Peter is thinking of the earthly life only;  
And not the life lived by faith and for God’s vision for the world.

So a matter of faith for all of us is that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, the savior;  
Who has come to take away our sins and destroy death itself;  
So that we can live our lives in God now and beyond the door of death.

Then Jesus calls the crowds closer and begins to teach them about the life of faith;  
About the day to day living that God wants for all people;  
About taking up their cross, taking up their lives to follow Him;  
To follow in an undivided way in Jesus' way of love, whatever the cost.

Now I've heard and written my share of sermons about this passage;  
And how Christianity is a hard life that might well involve suffering and challenges;  
And it does, but in this year of *Faith Matters*, I want us to understand and focus on  
The promise that taking up our crosses is about a life in God and with God  
A life of trust in God;  
A life of connection with God;  
A life empowered by God;  
A life that makes a difference in the lives of others and the world;  
It is not a life of failure, but a life of triumph.

Remember Jesus on the cross, and I'm jumping ahead in the story a little bit;  
Remember Jesus' cry from the cross – *Telestai!* It is finished! It is completed!  
His cry is not a whimper of defeat;  
No, it's a shout of victory because His cross has brought salvation to the world.

And so it can be with us as we take up our cross, not to save the world;  
But as we live in faith, in trust, in connectedness, empowered and with a true purpose;  
Then we, too, will live a life of accomplishment for God and with God;  
That's how faith matters in our daily lives.

### **Starting Today to Live in Faith**

Our faith matters;  
Having a good knowledge of the love story of God for all people and for the world;  
And especially about the life and teaching and ministry;

The death and resurrection of Jesus is important for us if we are going to live a life of faith.

Our faith matters in our daily lives;

We do not have to live our lives on our own;

And when we turn to God and put our trust in God;

Then the way is open for God to grace and empower our lives;

With God's presence and vision every moment of every day.

Finally, our faith matters to those around us and for the life of the world;

Imagine how the people in your life and the world would be so different;

If all knew the love of God in Jesus Christ;

Lived their days connected to God;

And loved one another the way God loves us.

We have a magnificent year of mission and ministry before us;

Even in the midst of the uncertainties we are facing with this virus;

And the uncertainties that come for all of our lives;

But if we will commit to live as though our faith matters;

Then God will begin and continue to change us and we will live a life that is truly life.

Amen.