

1 Samuel 12:20-24. "Do not be afraid," Samuel replied. "You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you.

Serve the LORD faithfully

- 1. Don't be afraid**
- 2. Consider what great things he has done for you**
- 3. Demonstrate the love of Christ as you serve Him**

If you happened to look up into the sky on Friday night around 7:30pm you would have seen quite a scene. After a family night out in Olivia we returned to Danube just in time to see a rather remarkable sight. As we looked up and toward the east we saw a massive thunderhead that was jarringly visible in the night sky. It was dark enough outside to see quick bolts of lightning race through the early night. However, the sun had not yet set completely and so there was just enough light to see a giant stack of white clouds piled on top of a much darker grey base. We watched in awe as this expansive storm cloud slowly consumed the sky. Thunder rumbled in the distance as the mighty power of God's creation was put on display.

Our reading for today opens with God's prophet Samuel telling the people, "***Do not be afraid.***" As Samuel spoke to the people they were still trembling with fear of God's almighty power and might. Samuel had just prayed that God would bring thunder and rain, and the LORD answered his prayer. The power of the almighty was suddenly put on display. The sky flashed with lightning, thunder ripped through the heavens, and rain came crashing down, Samuel had prayed to the God who formed the heavens and who could shake them with thunder and brighten them with lightning whenever he pleased and God showed every one that he had heard his servant Samuel. The LORD God is powerful and mighty. He hears the prayers of his people and yet the people of Israel had in large part forsaken him. He had chosen them to be his own and had been faithful to them and they had abandoned the LORD, relied on other things, and failed to trust in the only one who is completely trustworthy.

When they saw yet another enemy nation emerge as a serious threat against them they pleaded with Samuel to give them a king. They wanted someone who could deliver

them from this trouble. They wanted to feel strong and secure and safe, but instead of looking to God who had delivered them in the past it seemed that they looked everywhere else. They looked to the kings and the customs of the people around them. Even though God had delivered them time and time again, even though God had chosen them to be his own special people and rule over them like no one else, still they wanted to be like everyone else; and everyone else had a king.

This problem of lacking trust in God and being influenced by the surrounding nations was a continuing issue for the Israelites. Not only were the Israelites attracted to the monarchies of their neighbors, but they had become embroiled in an ongoing love affair with the gods that these neighbors served. Their neighbors were serving their powerless gods by finding joy in the pleasures of the flesh and, of course, the people of Israel wanted to be like everyone else. Even though God had given the Israelites a special privilege to know and serve the one true God they had abandoned their faithful and powerful God. They had preferred to be like everyone else and so they had turned to the gods of the masses. They turned to useless idols. Then they complained about the LORD's protection and had sought to replace the LORD's chosen leader Samuel. They had done much evil in the eyes of the LORD; and as the heavens shook they were left trembling and wondering how the Almighty God would respond to their unfaithfulness.

God's Word tells us that after seeing this sudden thunderstorm the people now stood in awe of the LORD and Samuel and they pleaded with Samuel ***"Pray to the LORD your God for your servants so that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king."*** And so Samuel looked at these people who had frustrated him and had angered God and yet he said to them, ***"Do not be afraid."*** Serve the LORD faithfully. He could say this because the LORD God, the powerful maker of heaven and earth, is gracious and merciful and patient as well as being almighty in his power. After all, this was, this is, the same God who came down with fire and smoke on Mount Sinai to give his righteous commands to Moses a second time even after Moses had smashed the first set of tablets in response to Israel's unfaithfulness. And yet the faithful LORD and free and faithful grace gave these holy commands to Moses again and as he did so God passed in front of Moses saying, ***"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exodus 34:6).*** God is powerful. God is just. But God is also patient and forgiving. He is slow to anger. He is abounding in love and faithfulness. And so Samuel stood in front of these people who had caused him so much grief with their disobedience and forsaken their God with their unfaithfulness, and yet in Samuel's last official address as their leader he told them, ***"Don't be afraid."***

Our God is powerful. He rules over all things. He commands the winds and the waves. He sends rain to water the earth. Storms and thunder come at his command; and in the ultimate display of his power He condemns those who reject his word. We

should fear his anger and not disobey what he commands. And yet our God is merciful. He is compassionate. He is slow to anger and abounding in love.

Thanks be to God. For we too have been disobedient. We too have failed to trust our God and in both times of prosperity and trouble. Instead of reaching for God, instead of leaning on our faithful Lord, we do what everybody else in this world seems to do; we reach for useless idols. The modern day gods of money and pleasure, tasteless entertainment and selfishness, lure us in with the promises of relief and pleasure. And for what, the fleeting hope of pleasure found in wealth, a temporary escape found in the rush of indulging sinful desire. Such things are useless idols. They are a useless nothingness, a black hole that does not provide lasting relief but such things can do nothing more than drag us into more trouble.

And yet we fall into this same trap. In both times of trouble and prosperity you and I put work and wealth before our God. We are called to serve others, to be a faithful wife, to be a loving husband, to be a good employee or employer; we are called to be good neighbors but in busy times we are taught by this sinful world to escape and to serve ourselves. In stressful situations we may very well indulge in bad habits and sinful pleasure (abusing alcohol, reckless gambling, outbursts of anger, needless gossip, sexual lust, and the list goes on and on). We indulge in these useless things rather than delighting in our faithful God. Rather than calling out to him in prayer and searching his Word we search for relief and release as we call on the things of this world because, well, everyone else is doing it. We must confess that this is not right. We must confess that we have sinned. We have failed to trust in God and rely on him. We have done what is evil we have failed to do what is good. Yes, we must confess that we deserve his punishment.

But our almighty God speaks words of comfort to our troubled hearts when Samuel says, "Don't be afraid." Our God is mercy. Our Lord is compassion. Consider what great things God has done for you. He has delivered you from sin and guilt. The maker of heaven and earth took on flesh and Jesus paid the price for you. And now you have been set free to serve your God. As we say in the words of our liturgy, "*By the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ, he has removed your guilt forever. You are his own dear child. May God give you strength to live according to his will.*"

We are all sinners, but that does not mean we are to be forever paralyzed with shame and guilt. As believers we know that we are sinners who have been forgiven by Christ. God forgives us who have failed to serve Him faithfully and we are renewed and healed so that by the grace of God we can serve our Lord by being that faithful father, that kind neighbor, that helpful wife, or faithful employee that God has called us to be. In Christ Jesus the heavy weight of guilt and shame is lifted from us so that we may faithfully serve our God in the roles that he has given to each one of us.

Don't be afraid, but consider the great things he has done for you. In his amazing grace the maker of heaven and earth looks upon each one of us and he restores us completely. We who were dead in our transgressions and sins are no longer sentenced

to turn our face from God in shame, but we are now alive in Christ and we are free to lift up our eyes and gaze into his loving countenance. We are free to worship our almighty and merciful God and lift our voices in prayer and praise. We are free to talk to our heavenly Father in prayer and approach his throne of grace with confidence and find strength and guidance so that we may turn from sin and live for him. As his chosen people we are free to serve him with lives of thankfulness for he graciously forgives us and cleanses us each day so that we may be empowered to serve him with all our heart. And so like Jesus said to the leper who returned in thankfulness our faithful Lord says to you, ***“Rise and go, your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:19)***. God has forgiven you and restored you; and so as his forgiven and chosen child serve him thankfully and praise him with a thankful heart.

God gives us opportunities to serve him throughout all our days. The story of Samuel teaches us this important lesson as well. Even when we may question our usefulness or effectiveness God gives us ways to serve Him and those around us. Samuel cared about these people and even though the people no longer wanted him to be their leader he would continue to faithfully serve God’s people and he would be a reflection of God’s faithful love. He would continue to make his faith known. He would be a positive example of obedience and trust in God. He would show them the way that is good and right. And he would continue to pray for God’s people.

There may be those in your life that you care about but are similar to the Israelites in their stubbornness. They continue to make poor decision after poor decision even though you have warned them. They have neglected God’s Word and his commands and they may not even seem to care for your help anymore. The temptation is to become so frustrated that you give up on them completely. But like Samuel we serve the LORD faithfully knowing that there is still an important role that God has for you to play. You know you can’t force your way into their life or force them to change their ways, but you can pray. You can ask your merciful LORD to touch their hearts with his word and open the eyes of these people that you care about. And as you pray for them you can also serve as an example of Christ’s love. Show them the way that is good and right. Live a life of thankful obedience that puts Christ on display in your life for all to see. This can be a humble task and it can at times be a rather thankless task, but it is a task made much easier when we consider the patient, forgiving, and faithful love of God. The Almighty God, the powerful ruler of heaven and earth does not treat us as our sins deserve, but in his unthinkable love he came to this world to save us. He chose us to be his own. He has graciously brought us to faith and forgives us even when we are unfaithful servants. In his goodness he heals us and renews us so that we can serve him with a thankful heart and with renewed vigor.

Come rain or shine, day in and day out, in days of happiness and joy, in days of trouble and distress, let us trust in our Lord and serve Him with thankfulness. Consider the great things he has done for you. Amen.