

Faith Is a Verb
Muddling Through
June 12, 2022

Good morning everyone.

For the past several weeks we've been talking about faith, specifically the idea that ...

- “Faith” is more than just what we believe in. It’s more than ...
 - “I believe God exists.”
 - “I believe Jesus is God come to earth in the flesh – as a real human being.”
 - “I believe the Bible is God’s Word to us.”
 - And so on.

That *is* “faith” ... but faith is more than that.

- And faith is more than what we believe God will *do* for us *because* we believe.
 - “I believe that God will forgive all my sins – past, present, and future – because of Jesus and what He did on the cross and in his resurrection.”
 - “I believe that God will use all things – even the bad things – for my good because I love him.”
 - “I believe God will move that mountain in my life.”

And that, too, *is* “faith” ... but faith is more than that.

Faith is also what moves *us* to do what *God* wants – maybe even something great or something we never imagined – because we believe He is leading us and will empower

us.

As I've said each week in this series ...

- Sometimes God wants to move the mountain *for* us.
- But sometimes – a lot of times, actually – God wants us to *climb* the mountain *for Him* ... for *His purposes*, for *His Kingdom* instead of ours.

Now, I know this is an issue that most directly applies to those of us who are Christians; to those of us who believe in and follow Jesus.

And I know that not everyone here or watching online *is* a Christian.

But even if you're *not* a Christian, I think this is worth diving into because if, at some point, you decide *to become* a believer in and follower of Jesus, this understanding will be critical

because ...

- It's this kind of faith – faith as a verb – that opens the door to the great adventure that Christianity is meant to be.
- It's this kind of faith that allows you not only to *see* God at work, but to *participate* in His work – to *become part* of what God is doing in the world for the good of the world.

But just because it's an adventure doesn't mean it's always fun, because it's not.

In fact, this kind of faith typically requires you to do at least one of five things – and maybe even all five – that are challenging.

“Faith as a verb” typically requires ...

- Choosing “crazy” ... doing what God asks you to do, even if it doesn't make sense to

you or anyone else at the time.

- Giving up ... sacrificing yourself – your power, position, and prestige – so that someone else (or something else) can “go up.”

This past week, I heard a sermon from a guy who is *also* doing a series on faith that I thought captured both of those ideas pretty well.

So, I want to show you just a little bit of what he said. It's really good.

Check it out.

Video Clip

I think that guy might actually have a future as a preacher. 😊

Now, if this is your first time with us or your first time in a long time, you *did hear correctly* when

Jason talked about an impending decision concerning whether *his* church – Hope Church KC – should merge with *this* church – North Heartland Community Church.

That’s something that *both* churches have been talking about and praying about for the past several months and I’ll say more about that a bit later.

By the way, if you want to hear more of Jason’s series on faith, you can find it under the messages tab on their website, www.hopechurchkc.com.

Anyway, back to *this* series.

Faith as a verb typically, at some point, requires ...

- Choosing “crazy”

- And giving up ...

... which is what we talked about in the previous two Sundays.

And if you missed either of those messages, I encourage you to go to the media section of *our* website, northheartland.org, where you can watch, listen to, or read the transcript of the message.

But “faith as a verb” also typically requires

...

- Muddling through – “continuing despite confusion and difficulties,” which is how one dictionary defines the phraseⁱ.
- (Being intentional about) Leaving a legacy
- Doing the right thing

Those last two, we’re going to talk about next

Sunday and the Sunday after that.

But, today, we're going to talk about "muddling through" ... which absolutely positively *does not sound* like fun because it is *not* fun at all.

Whereas *choosing "crazy"* – for those of a certain temperament – might actually *be* fun ...

And *giving up*, while not fun *does at least* have a sense of purpose attached to it – your sacrifice is necessary so that something good can happen ...

Muddling through is pretty much the worst.

Even the word itself – *muddle* – sounds unpleasant. After all, the root of the word is "mud."

And when you're "muddling through," it feels like you're sloshing and slopping through the mire of your life while making very little

progress towards anything.

Some of you know what that feels like because that's where you are today – you're smack dab in the middle of muddling.

If you're a Christian, this is the point when the idea of "walking by faith and not by sight" becomes real to you because it's nearly impossible to see the purpose in anything that's happening and in anything you're doing.

The only way you "stay the course" in those moments is through faith.

The only way you "continue on despite confusion and difficulties" is through faith.

The only way you remain faithful ...

- To the "crazy" that God asked you to choose ...

- To the decision to “give up” so someone else could “go up.”

... when it’s not working out like you thought it would and you’re wondering if it’s worth it ...

The only way you’re able to do that is through *this* kind of faith – faith as a verb.

John’s Story

... which brings us to Part III of the story of John the Baptist.

If you were here for the first two weeks of this series, you know that we’ve been following the course of John’s life because John is a great example of all five of the “faith as a verb” actions.

To do what John did – to go out into the wilderness and be the one calling out “Repent! Prepare the way for the Lord!” John had to

choose “crazy” which was Part I of his story.

As I said in the first message, even though it’s likely he knew from childhood that he was called to be the advance messenger of the coming Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth ...

... there still had to be a moment in time where John said “yes.”

- “Yes, I will go live in the desert.”
- “Yes, I will dress and eat like a crazy man.”
- “Yes, I will preach an offensive message.”
- “Yes, I will baptize everyone willing to confess their sins.”

In faith, through faith and because of faith, John chose “crazy” and amazing things happened.

Not only did thousands of men and women hear

and accept his message (including at least a few non-Jewish Roman soldiers, which was incredible) ...

John got to see the literal fulfillment of his prophecy about the arrival of the Messiah on the day when Jesus showed up where he was baptizing and asked John to baptize him.

John refused at first. After all, why would the One for whom the way was being prepared need to go under the waters like everyone else?

But Jesus insisted and John relented.

And as Jesus was coming up out of the water ...

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

And a voice from heaven said,

*“This is my Son, whom I love;
with him I am well pleased.”
Matthew 3:15-17 (NLT)*

And John got to see that and experience that.

It was the greatest day of his ministry, perhaps the greatest day of his life.

But on the very next day – less than 24 hours after his finest moment – and this is where Part II of John’s story begins ...

- Key members of John’s inner circle leave him to go and follow Jesus.
- And they seek out and encourage others to come *with* them and follow Jesus *instead of John*.
- And those “others” do come and follow. *Multitudes* of others.

So many, in fact, that several months later, some of John's remaining disciples come to him with what they expect will be distressing news.

“Rabbi, we hate to tell you but ...”

“The man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one you identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people.

“And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us.” John 3:26 (NLT)

And John listens to them. And he probably nods his head in understanding.

And then he says – and I'm shortening this greatly since we talked about it at length last Sunday ...

John says, in essence, “good! I'm not *jealous* of Jesus, I'm *happy* for him because the way this is

supposed to work ...

‘The way it’s *always* been supposed to work is that ...’

“He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.” John 3:30 (NLT)

“He must increase. I must decrease.”

“I’ve prepared the way, now I need to get out of the way.”

“I’m going to *give up* my power, my position, and my prestige so that Jesus can *go up* in his.”

As I said last week, for John to say that took an incredible amount of faith as well as spiritual and emotional maturity.

After all, how many leaders at the pinnacle of success would even *think* something like that let alone *say it* to their most loyal followers who

earnestly want them to keep on leading?

It's just very rare.

However, even though John *understood* that his place and his role was to change and was willing to communicate it to his followers ...

What he probably *didn't* understand in that moment was that “living out” that change would turn out to be the greatest challenge of his life – even greater than the initial challenge of choosing “crazy” ... which was *huge*.

Because living out that change meant that John was going to have to “muddle through” *just like so many of us*.

As I've said each week, when we read stories of people like John in the Bible, many of us think that because they are *in* the Bible, they must somehow be “inherently above” the rest of us.

- They're inherently more together.
- They're inherently more spiritual.
- They're inherently more mature.

But they're not. They struggle just like you and me.

And John was about to find himself in a struggle where he would wonder if it was worth it to "continue on despite confusion and difficulties" ... which is Part III of his story.

Muddled John

Not long after John's disciples come to him with the news of Jesus' expanding ministry, another group of "disciples" come to him.

But these disciples aren't followers of a spiritual leader.

Instead, they are soldiers under the authority of Herod Antipas, the Roman-appointed tetrarch over the region where John had been baptizing.ⁱⁱ

Now, Herod basically has one job which is to “do whatever it takes to keep the peace” ... including death to anyone who disturbs it.

And because of the multitudes he had drawn to himself over the years and his forceful style of preaching, John had been disturbing it. *Greatly.*

More importantly, John had been disturbing Herod’s *personal life*.

Turns out that Herod had divorced his first wife and married the woman who had been married to his half-brother, Philip, a woman who was also his niece.

The whole thing was pretty messed up.

And, apparently, John had heard about it.

So, John did what prophets do.

John publicly criticized Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, for marrying Herodias, his brother's wife, and for many other wrongs he had done. Luke 3:19 (NLT)

He called him out and, apparently, more than once.

So, in response, Herod did what *rulers* typically do when prophets confront them.

Luke writes that ...

Herod put John in prison, adding this sin [of incarcerating a prophet] to his many others. Luke 3:20 (NLT)

And prison is where John will remain for the rest of his life – an unfortunate ending which

we'll talk about next week.

But, for today, I want to talk about John's experience in that prison and what it teaches us about "faith as a verb" ...

... specifically, what it means to "muddle through" – to continue on despite confusion and difficulties.

And, at this point, there no better words than those to describe John's life and state of mind.

**As to "difficulties" I think that's obvious.
*John was in prison.***

And life in a Roman prison wasn't anything like life in a modern-day prison.

Being in prison today is no picnic but we can say with integrity that incarceration has come a long way since then.

John was being held in a place known as “The Black Fortress.” It was built on a hilltop, about 1,100 feet above the Dead Sea below and surrounded on three sides by deep ravines. No escape was possible.ⁱⁱⁱ

As to John’s state of mind, there definitely was some confusion.

I’m reading between the lines on this a little bit but, I can imagine John thinking ...

“For me to ‘decrease’ and Jesus to ‘increase’ is one thing. But for Jesus to completely *ignore* me and my situation? That’s another thing altogether.”

“After all, if He’s the Messiah ... and the Messiah is supposed to be the “deliverer of Israel” by bringing judgement on the enemies of Israel ...

“Why is Herod still in power? Why hasn’t Jesus done something to take him down?”

“At the very least, why hasn’t Jesus done something to deliver *me* from this imprisonment?”

“Furthermore, if Jesus is the Messiah, why do I keep hearing reports that he’s eating and drinking with unrepentant tax collectors and other sinners instead of condemning them?”

“After all, that was the message I was preaching about him before he showed up.”

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Matthew 3:12 (NIV)

“And all of those people are the chaff!”

So, John was confused on two fronts.

- First, about his own situation.
- Second, about what Jesus was doing and not doing.

And it's at this point, that John has yet another choice.

He can sit and sulk in a corner of his cell crying over the fact that "this isn't what I signed up for!"

John can wallow in the mud of self-pity ... or ... he can muddle through ...

... which is the same choice that confronts *all* of us who believe in Jesus when the two words that best describe our life are "difficulty" and "confusion" ...

... especially when ...

- We're doing what we believe God asked us

to do – what He led us to do and empowered us to do

- And things aren't working out like we hoped and expected.

We can wallow or we can muddle.

So, what is John going to do?

To answer that, we need to look at Mark's account of John's imprisonment which has a few more details than Luke's.

Mark writes – and by the way, most scholars believe that Mark's Gospel is the recollection of Simon Peter (who was eyewitness to the life of Jesus) as told to Mark.

Mark writes ...

Herod had sent soldiers to arrest and imprison John as a favor to

Herodias.

She had been his brother Philip's wife, but Herod had married her. John had been telling Herod, "It is against God's law for you to marry your brother's wife."

Mark 6:17-18 (NLT)

Ah ... so, not only was Herod upset with John ... Herodias – his current wife – was upset, too.

In fact, Mark tells us ...

Herodias bore a grudge against John and wanted to kill him.

She wanted more than *prison* for John. She wanted him *dead*.

But without Herod's approval she was powerless ...

And apparently Herod did not approve. But why?

Mark writes ...

*Herod respected John and knowing that he was a good and holy man, he protected him.
Mark 6:20 (NLT)*

... which is a very weird dynamic.

“Dude, I don’t like what you’re saying and neither does my wife. But I respect you, so I won’t kill you.”

Now here’s the most important part of what Mark tells us that the other writers do not.

He writes ...

Herod was greatly disturbed whenever he talked with John, but even so, he liked to listen to him. Mark 6:21 (NLT)

And that tells us that, even though John was no

longer on the big stage with the bright lights (metaphorically speaking), John did what John had always done.

He spoke for God.

But now, instead of being able to address the multitudes, he could only speak to just one man – Herod.

So that's what he did.

And from the way Mark describes it, apparently, he did so on a regular basis.

“Whenever Herod talked to John” he writes, *“he was greatly disturbed.”*

So, John's choice – in spite of his difficulties and in spite of his confusion over his situation and how Jesus was responding and not responding

...

John's choice was to muddle through, to stay the course, to continue on, to keep on keeping on – however you want to describe it.

Keeping the Faith

So how did he do it?

“Well, Rick, obviously it was *faith* ... specifically *faith as a verb* which is what this series is about, isn't it?”

Well, *yes*, it was faith.

But how did John *keep* his faith? Why didn't he lose faith? Why wasn't it crushed by his difficulties and confusion?

I mean, it could have been, but it wasn't.

I think John did three things kept his faith strong.

And I think these three things will help any of us whose life is characterized by difficulties and confusion – even those of us who are not Christians.

Well, maybe just two of them if you're not a Christian.

I also think these three things John did are going to be helpful – critical even – for those of us who call North Heartland “home” if we *do* merge with Hope Church KC, because ...

- As clear as it might seem right now ...
- As wise as it might appear right now ...
- As cool and exciting as it might seem right now – and I know that not everyone feels that way but some of us do ...

There will days – and maybe many days – where

some of us – and maybe many of us are going to wonder ...

- “What have we done?”
- “Did we misunderstand what God was saying to us?”
- “Is it really worth it?”

... because it's not all going to work out exactly as we envision it.

And even if it did, it's still wouldn't be easy because as I said last week, everyone involved is going to have to give up something along the way.

Everyone involved is going to have to die to self-interest in some way, and when that happens, we're going to wonder, we're going to question, we're going to doubt.

So, what did John do?

1. John voiced his doubt to Jesus instead of suppressing it.

Matthew writes that ...

*When John, who was in prison,
heard about the deeds of the
Messiah ...*

Specifically, when John heard that Jesus wasn't doing what John expected the Messiah to do ...

*... he sent his disciples to ask him,
"Are you the one who is to come,
or should we expect someone
else?"* *Matthew 11:2*
(NIV)

In other words, "did I get this wrong? Have I gone through all of this for nothing?"

Now, here's the point – and this is hard for those

of us who think being a Christian means you have it all figured out and you never struggle.

It was OK for John to do that and it's OK for us to do that, too.

It's OK to go to God about whatever is happening in your life and say, "I don't understand. This is painful. Is this really what you want? Is this really where I'm supposed to be?"

"Because this isn't what I expected when I signed up!"

God can handle that kind of questioning from us.

In fact, that's why there's a whole book of the Bible called "Lamentations" which records the laments of the people of Israel after Jerusalem was leveled and they were carried off into exile into Babylon in 587 B.C.

“God, this is painful. Is this really what you want? Is this really where we’re supposed to be?”

I think that book was written to show us that God can handle it but also – and maybe even more importantly ...

- That we *need* to lament.
- That we *need* to express our doubts.
- That we *need* to grieve what we’re losing when things change.

Years ago, a wise person told me “Rick, you can’t leave it until you grieve it.”

You can’t move on from whatever it is you’ve suffered or lost until you question it, acknowledge it, and mourn it.

And that's what John was doing.

And he did it the right way by going directly to who he believed was the source of his pain, the one person who could actually answer his questions and do something about it.

Do you know what it's called when you voice your concerns over and over to people who can't do anything about it?

Gossip.

And you know what gossip does? It destroys morale and it causes division.

Now, I don't know this for sure, but I'm willing to bet that John didn't tell Herod his doubts about Jesus because Herod couldn't do anything about it.

Instead, he told *Jesus* his doubts about Jesus.

If you were here last week, you heard me go a little bit of a rant about being tired of hearing people say “they’re just trying to get rid of the old people around here.”

- “That’s really why they want to merge with Hope Church KC.”
- “That’s why they have a goal of growing younger.”

And I understand – sort of – why someone might think that.

So, my rant wasn’t meant to say “don’t ever express that. Don’t ever ask questions.”

My point was – and is – direct it to the right person instead of people who can’t do anything about it ...

... which, in this case, is me or our other pastors.

Listen, as the lead pastor of this church, you can say anything you want to me. Seriously. I may not like what you say but I won't be mad at you for saying it.

What *will* make me mad – is you saying it over and over to others; to people who can't answer the question or do anything about it.

That's gossip, and it destroys morale, and it causes division.

And as a pastor, I am not allowed *by Jesus* to let that go unaddressed. The health of the church, the mission of the church matters too much to do that.

So, in case you were wondering, that's where all of that was coming from last week.

Anyway, the first thing John did to strengthen his faith was to voice his doubt to Jesus instead

of suppressing it or gossiping about it.

2. John got the *full* story of what Jesus was doing.

As we saw last week, John's disciples were jealous of Jesus. They didn't want him to increase while John decreased.

So, I think they spun the story a little bit about how Jesus was doing things that no self-respecting Messiah should ever do.

I think they left out some important pieces, which is why John finally said, "look, I need more than hearsay. Go ask him point blank what's going on."

When John's disciples found Jesus and asked him John's question ...

... Matthew tells us that ...

Jesus replied, "Go back and

report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” Matthew 11:2-5 (NIV)

Now, when Jesus said that he wasn't just listing off a series of random accomplishments.

He was actually quoting the prophet Isaiah's description of what the Messiah would do.

In essence, He was saying, “John, the same Isaiah who prophesied about you, also prophesied about me. And just like *you* did what he said, *I'm* doing what he said.”

And then Jesus added – and this is so important.

“Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

Matthew 11:6 (NIV)

In other words, “Blessed is anyone who doesn’t sulk and whine and wallow because I’m not doing it the way they expected me to do it.”

And the point is ... if you’re in a place of difficulty and confusion and you’re trying to muddle through ...

... you need to avoid focusing on your expectations of what God *should be* doing and, instead, focus on what God *actually is* doing. You need to get the full story.

Finally, and again, I’m reading between the lines on this one ... but I have to believe this is true, especially after Jesus’ responds to John’s question.

3. I think John kept the faith by revisiting the moment where his calling had been vindicated.

Remember when Jesus came to John to be baptized and John resisted?

And Jesus said, “I want you to do it anyway.”

I don't think that was for Jesus' benefit. It couldn't have been.

I think it was for John's benefit. I think Jesus knew what was going to happen to John.

And I think that's why he allowed himself to be baptized so that John could have a front row seat to most amazing thing anyone has ever seen (next to the resurrection of Jesus himself).

I think Jesus wanted John to have a moment where it was clear as could be: “John, you heard right when you thought God told you to choose crazy.”

“And everything that follows – your ‘decreasing’ ... your ‘muddling through’ ... is all part of the

plan. And it's worth it."

"Well done good and faithful servant."

In the first message of this series, I told you about the house that Jetta and I bought last fall.

How, we looked at so many houses because we had very specific criteria.

And we found nothing that fit *except* for one house. But it was not what we expected.

- We weren't looking for new built.
- We weren't looking for that price.

I won't go back into all of it again, but repeatedly God unmistakably confirmed it was the house to buy.

When the builder finally finished and we moved

in March, it was exciting at first.

But then something terrible happened.

We could not get the truck in the garage.

“I know we measured this thing!”

God said two things to me through that experience: “Rick, remember everything I did to confirm for you that this is where you’re to be.”

“In spite of this difficulty, in spite of your confusion right now, this is right. So, calm down, and figure it out. Buy a new truck if you need to. But this is the place.”

And we did figure it out without having to buy a new truck.

The second thing God said to me was, “Rick, your experience with this house is a metaphor for what’s going to happen with this merger –

when you guys try to blend these two church families.”

“So, I want you to remember how I led you to this point – all the crazy unexplainable providential things that happened.”

And, friends, that’s why we have asked everyone who calls NHCC home to take a few minutes each day over the past 10 days to read a verse and pray or to drive your neighborhood or walk through this building.

And then fill out a card expressing what you heard God saying to you through that time.

We need to be able – no, *I* need to be able to look back on this time and say, “not only did I and our pastors think this is what God was doing. Everyone else saw it too.”

“We chose crazy together. We decided together that God was asking all of us to give up NHCC so

that the new church we'll form – Hope Church – can go up and become even greater.”

Conclusion

Let's bring this to a close.

- John voiced his doubt
- John got the full story
- John revisited the moment where his calling had been vindicated.

And all of those things together not only told him he was on the right track and that it was worth it. They told him that he was not alone, that God was with him right there in that prison cell.

And I wonder if this morning some of us might need that same assurance. That you are not

alone.

So, I've asked the band to do a song which is kind of a prayer of faith.

As they sing it, maybe you can let their words be your prayer.

Endnotes

ⁱ https://idioms_new.en-academic.com/11250/muddle_through

ⁱⁱ <https://www.neverthirsty.org/bible-studies/life-of-christ-ministry-in-galilee-early-a-d-32/john-the-baptist-has-doubts-about-christ/>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.biblewise.com/bible_study/questions/johns-imprisonment.php