

WE CAN COUNT ON... God's Loving Presence Always

Theme: As the favored children of God, God's love abides with us and in us now and forever.

Text: Philippians 4:4-13

Series: What Can We Count on From God?

What *Can* We Count on From God? (said curiously, strumming my chin—an interesting question to investigate)

What *Can* (high pitch) We Count on From God? (excited-like a kid in a candy store waiting for the goodies to come)

What *Can* (low pitch resignation) We Count on From God? (with sadness and disappointment said with a drooping head)

What *Can* We *Count* on from God? (anger—arms raised yelling at the heavens as if God has failed to come through again with his promises)

This is the question I would like us to explore during the month of January. As I have already tried to act out, this becomes a very different question depending on the mood of the one asking it. 1. It can be a question that raises curiosity. Yeah, that is a good question, it might be interesting to explore. 2. We can ask it with a high pitch of anticipation. Like a kid in a candy store, we are eager to scoop up all the blessings that God may have for us. 3. But it can also be asked with a drooping sense of sadness. God you are a disappointment, I just don't know what to expect from you. My prayers seem to fall short, where do I put my confidence? 4. Finally, raise the pitch level a little higher, we might quite frankly have an underlying anger toward God, because we have sought God and trusted Him, and what have we gotten, not much. God you are an underachiever!

Where does this question come from? Frankly, it comes out of my own recent and current journey of faith. I consider myself an incurable doubter. There are some people who seem to fly through this life with a simple, unperturbed faith, which never seems to be shaken by life's setbacks. I am not one of those. Life comes at us and for me raises questions. Whether it is my own personal issues or watching the tragedies unfold in others or on TV, I am constantly trying to reconcile life's experiences with my understanding of the way I believe God is supposed to work with people.

In my experience there is good and bad doubt. Bad doubt stands outside of faith and marshals all the arguments against why there isn't a God or why faith is a self-deluding enterprise. Good doubt stands within the circle of faith, is not afraid to ask the hard questions, because if there is this God to which Scriptures give

WE CAN COUNT ON... God's Loving Presence Always

witness, then questions will only lead to a deepening of faith, because God can stand up to my puny queries.

The question, "What Can We Count on from God?" gets raised, I believe, because we have an unconscious assumption. The assumption goes something like this: "If I follow Jesus, align my life to His, keep my noise clean and attempt to be as faithful as I know how, then there will be benefits, perhaps even advantages that will come my direction. I should be able cash in on goodness in the form of longer and healthier life, healing of disease, protection against life's dangers and disasters, and maybe there will be even greater prosperity and comfort thrown in."

Yet the realities of life often seem to challenge the assumption that there is a connection between faithfulness and fullness, at least in regards to this life's rewards.

Let me illustrate: You will have your own examples.

1. February 28, 2005 we were presented with the shocking news that Judge Joan Lefkow's husband, Michael, and her mother, Donna, were brutally murdered in their family home. The author of the Chicago Tribune article began it with our question: "Don't all these good deeds man anything?" Michael Lefkow had dedicated his career as a lawyer to serving those who could not afford legal counsel. By all accounts this couple had an highly affectionate, mutually respectful and even doting relationship. Michael had served God through his involvement in their local Episcopal Church and the advisory council to the bishop. Don't we expect that God should somehow intervene and put a hedge of protection around those who are trying to honor him?
2. The second example comes from my own family story. My paternal grandparents were missionaries in Tibet, going out in the early part of the last century. My father was raised in Tibet from ages 2-17. One of the young men who joined my grandparents in Tibet was named Z. S. Loftis. I know his story through a journal he kept. He graduated from Vanderbilt Medical College, because the Mission Board of the Disciples of Christ said they needed doctors. Z. S. Loftis had prayed that God would allow him the privilege of serving Him in the most difficult place on this planet. He responded to the call of God and Tibet was his destination. He left San Francisco for Batang, a Chinese town on the Tibetan border in September, 1908 and did not arrive at this mission station until 9 months later in June, 1909. He had to travel by boat, train, Yak and mule up to the 10,000 feet elevation of Batang. By August, 1909 he had contracted small pox and died from its complications. This long waited for gifted surgeon and congenial, lest the others devastated. How do they make sense of this in God's grand scheme of things? Here was a man in every way dedicated

WE CAN COUNT ON... God's Loving Presence Always

to the service of God's kingdom and from our very human vantage point, was struck down long before his time. Lord, is this any way to treat those who are faithful to you?

3. My third illustration comes from the one who will be a main character in our reflections throughout this month, the apostle Paul. There has probably been no more influential person to the future of Christianity than the Apostle Paul. His combination of passion and intellect; missional focus and ability to distill truth, has not been surpassed. He spent most of his second missionary tour in the land we would call Turkey today. Cities like Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Ephesus, all came under his witness to Christ, to the point where he appointed elders in these towns. Through his initial efforts the gospel spread like fire through these lands. Yet if you were to go to Turkey today you will find a land that is 98% Muslim. Even though they claim their government is secular and their constitution ensures freedom of religion, the small remnant of Christians who meet there today, do so in ways that will not draw attention to themselves, because of potential reprisals. What would Paul think of all his labors? Was it worth it? Would he say, I gave my life for this people, and look what happens in the long run, it was all wiped out?

Well, it is stories like the Lefkows, Z. S. Loftis, and the apostle Paul that have led me to question, "*What Can We Count on from God?*" This question has all the mixture of curiosity, anticipation, sadness and anger, because this is our life experience. What I am trying to find is that place of sure foundation. What is the irreducible minimum upon which we build our faith? Is there such a thing as a ground of certainty, if so, and what is it?

So beginning today and throughout the Sundays of January, I will attempt to state what I believe we can count on from God, as the basis for life and faith. Next Sunday...our topic is *transformation*: God is more concerned about our character than our comfort; the third lesson centers on *Hope: For Christian the Best Always Yet to Come*; finally, *Redemption: God Resurrects good from evil*.

This morning our theme will lead us right to the communion table: **As the favored children of God, God's love abides with us and in us now and forever.**

Read Philippians 4:4-7, 10-13

Many of the insights I am going to share with you come from the Apostle Paul. As I have tried to get inside his mindset, look at life through his eyes, I have come to realize that his perspective is about 180 degrees out of phase with our world view. Frankly, we just don't get it. I am trying to get it. If we were to ask the average American and even the average American Christian, what is the good life? We would build the good life on the belief of an ever upward progressive

WE CAN COUNT ON... God's Loving Presence Always

sense of the blessings of God. And what are they? They are getting the right job, so we can live in the right home, so that our kids can go to the right schools, so that our standard of living can be better than our parents, so that we can have the best that money can buy, surrounding ourselves with the latest comforts and electronic gadgets from IPODS to Plasma TV's. We are blessed when God gives us a promotion and our happiness is threatened when there is a setback and all is not going swimmingly from a circumstantial perspective.

Then the apostle comes along says one of the most truly astounding things that has ever been written, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:12b-13).

Depending upon Paul's current circumstances we might be able to dismiss His extravagant claim to contentment in whatever his circumstances. Someone has said, "I have known riches and I have known poverty. I prefer riches." If Paul were writing this letter to the Philippians while stretched out on lounge chair on a Hawaiian white sand beach, we could cynically reject his assertion. The most likely circumstance is that his letter is written while under house arrest in Rome, chained perpetually to a member's of Caesar's elite Praetorian Guard. Paul makes reference to his circumstance in Philippians 1.

What is the secret of contentment that Paul has discovered? What does he seem to know that we have not yet got? Whatever it is, we note that a major characteristic of contentment is that it transcends ever changing external circumstances. Note Paul's language throughout this text, v. 4: "Rejoice in the Lord, when it is convenient and God is blessing my life." No, "Rejoice in the Lord *always*, again I say rejoice." v. 6: "Do not be anxious about *anything*, but in *everything*, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving* [thank God in whatever circumstance you find yourself], *present your requests to God.*" v. 11-13: "...I have learned to be content *whatever the circumstances*. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content *in any and every situation*, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do *everything* through him who gives me strength."

Am I right? Paul is on to something that we just don't quite comprehend. What is the secret to contentment? We know that it goes beyond changing variables that life can throw at you. It must be some inner anchor of the soul.

From my reading of the New Testament and especially the writings of Paul, he had come to an experience of the unchanging love of God that embraced his heart. Let's look at this foundation from three angles.

1. The love of God is the presence of the Holy Spirit poured out in a believer's heart. To Paul there were no barriers to God's love. You could not erect a prison wall high enough to keep the love of God out. It was a reality applied directly to the human heart. He stresses it as an experiential reality. In

WE CAN COUNT ON... God's Loving Presence Always

Romans 5:5 Paul writes, "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

The Holy Spirit is none other than the Spirit of Jesus who comes to live in our hearts. What makes a Christian? Quite simply a Christian is one who has received the indwelling presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. A Christian is one who is *in Christ*, and *Christ in me*. Jesus promised that upon his leaving this earth he would send a replacement who could take up residence inside of us. "And I will ask the Father, and he will give another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of Truth...for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans (fatherless); I will come to you" (John 14:16-18). Our greatest fear, I believe, is that we will be abandoned in our time of need. Jesus addressed that fear when he said, "I am with you always to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20) or to his followers, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28).

This is the love that embraced Paul's heart even as he was confined against his will in a Roman jail. James K. Baxter put it this way, "Lovers have many ways of expressing their love, but especially two. One is the words, 'I love you.' The other is the kiss. God's word to me, reduced to essence is 'I love you.' His Spirit, as the mystics long ago observed, is his kiss." To receive the Spirit is to allow ourselves to be kissed.

I stress the difficult circumstances as the test of faith, because if it doesn't work when life is in the pits, what good is it? One of the favorite hymns of the church comes from the pen of Chicago businessman by the name of Horatio Spafford. After losing everything in the great Chicago Fire of 1871, he rebuilt his business and became rather prosperous. He came to the conclusion that he wanted to serve Christ without distraction so decided to move his entire family to Jerusalem. Because of some unfinished business, he put his wife and four daughters on a ship in New York, sailing for France, with the promise that he would join them shortly. While their ship was in transit, it was rammed by another ship and sank. He received a two word telegram from his wife. It simply read, "Saved Alone." His four daughters were lost at sea.

He booked passage on a liner to join his wife. While on the way there he was shown the very spot where the ship had gone down. It was then that he wrote the hymn, "*It Is Well With My Soul*." The first verse reads,

"When peace, like a river attendeth my soul
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul."

WE CAN COUNT ON... God's Loving Presence Always

He had found a safe place in the heart of God that was an inner fortress of contentment.

2. What is the message that the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts? It is the same message that the Father spoke to the heart of His Son. ***We are favored, graced children of God.*** The Father is crazy about us. We have a special place with him.

When Jesus began his public ministry, he presented himself to John for baptism. Though reluctant John acceded to Jesus request, as His sign of ordination for His public ministry. As Jesus came out of the waters of baptism, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and the voice of the Father spoke a message of encouragement. In Mark's version, the Father speaks directly to the Son, ***"You are my son, marked and chosen by love, the pride of my life"*** (Mark 1:11). (I love Eugene Peterson's The Message translation). The Father wants the Son to know the place he has in His heart. In Matthew's version, the Father speaks to the crowd like a Proud Papa, ***"This is my son, marked and chosen by my love, the pride of my life"*** (Matt. 3:17). It is as if the Father cannot contain himself. ***"You know who this is...this is my Son...my buttons are busting."*** I have said before, but it bears repeating, we who are parents can thoroughly understand this. When my daughter graduated from medical school in May, 2002, I warned her ahead of time, that I intended to make an absolute fool of myself and her. When her name was called to receive her hood, I rose to my feet and shouted as loud as my lungs would permit, ***"Way to go, Aimee!"*** I had paid a lot of money for that moment.

Of all the things the Father, could have said to the son at the beginning of his ministry, why this? The Father knew where the Son's life was headed. It would end on a cross. There would be no greater challenge and doubt producing moment that when Jesus would fall before the Father in the garden of Gethsemane and cry to his Daddy, ***"Abba, Father, Let this cup pass from me..."*** If there be any other way than going to the cross, make it happen. He could have said, ***"If you love me...you wouldn't allow this to happen."*** Yet, Jesus didn't say that. Even the cross was an expression of the Father's love...for us. What the Son needed to know at the beginning of his ministry as the central foundational truth was the special place he had in the Father's heart, because there would be circumstances that could call that into question. Paul never complained about his rotten circumstances as if they were contrary to God's love for him. He experienced a message of the heart that transcended circumstances.

There is a sense that we have the same standing before God, as Jesus did when we are in Christ. What is the message that the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts according to Paul? Paul writes in Romans 8:16 another message of experience that is internal, ***"The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children"*** (Romans 8:16). You see to have the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus in us, puts us also under the special favor of God. In Christ, we are viewed as His

WE CAN COUNT ON... God's Loving Presence Always

beloved. What the Father says to the Son he says to us, "You are my child, marked and chosen by my love, the pride of my life."

A priest from Detroit by the name of Edward Farrell took a two-week summer vacation in Ireland. While there his uncle celebrated his 80th birthday. On that day the two of them got up before dawn for a morning walk. They paused to watch the sunrise in silence. Suddenly the 80 year old uncle turned and began skipping down the road. He was radiant, beaming, smiling from ear to ear.

"Uncle Seamus, you really look happy." "I am, lad." "Want to tell me why?" His uncle replied, "Yes, you see, me Abba is very fond of me." That is the message of the Father to the Son and to us because of the Son.

3. Finally, the love of God through the Holy Spirit is not just a privatized, individualistic experience; **the love of God through the Holy Spirit is spirit of the Christian community**. Rarely, if ever, is the Holy Spirit biblically considered the possession of a person, but one who indwells a people called the church or the body of Christ.

Where do we encounter the love of God in addition to the message of the heart--through His people? This was one of the main reasons Paul was writing to the Philippians. They had provided for Paul in his difficulties. "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it...Yet it was good of to share in my troubles" (Philippians 4:10. 14) The church as the body of Christ is nothing less than the heart of Jesus lived out in the presence of one another.

We can face almost anything in life, if we are loved through it by God's people. That is the gift we give to each other. A young couple lost their daughter suddenly through what was considered to be a common virus that began raging through her body. The mother wrote, "In short span of three days, she went from a happy, active child sitting next to me a dinner to a little girl whose brain could no longer function due to spontaneous bleeding."

Losing their daughter in such a dramatically rapid fashion, raised all the inevitable "why" questions. In this letter the mother addressed our question of this series, "Why live a 'good' life if bad things will still happen? Quite frankly we have found the answer to be an easy one—because good people have good family and friends to get them through those bad times...All you good people have been pivotal in getting us through this terrible time in our lives."

Paul describes the rhythm of relationships in the body of Christ, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored; every part rejoices with it" (I Corinthians 12:26). Love does not necessarily change the difficult circumstances, but to be loved through them makes it all palatable.

WE CAN COUNT ON... God's Loving Presence Always

What can we count on from God? **We can count on...God's loving presence always.** As we come to the communion table before us, the one presiding at this table is Jesus Himself. He bids us to come and receive the signs of his love, his body broken, and his shed blood. This is a family table, and we are meant to gather around the person of Jesus. The presence of the Holy Spirit is here; He speaks the message of favor to our hearts, **"You are my children, marked and chosen by my love, the pride of my life."** But this love is not just for isolated individuals, it is family love shared with each other who draw our life from the One who presides.