

I. Introduction

Hi Waterford, it's Pastor Neil. Let me tell you about a time about 12 years ago when I became angry at God for doing me a favor. ...

You see, I had grown up believing many promises I'd heard in church or in the Bible:

God will never let you down.

Jesus is a friend, he's a friend next to you.

If God feels miles away from you, guess who moved?

This quote: “I will never leave you nor forsake you”

So then I was dismayed when my spiritual life was feeling dry and God felt far away, despite my preaching and leading worship, and my personal prayer times. Worship services were just a tsunami of words that I couldn't take in. I tried to reclaim those promises that I just named, but God still felt silent and distant to me. At that point God was a well-developed concept with a respected place in my life over time, but not a closely felt person or divine presence.

Through the blessing of my spiritual director, I was led to understand I was probably experiencing the phenomenon of “the dark night of the soul”, a period of time in which God may feel unexpectedly and totally absent from a person's life. I learned that God sometimes allows and uses such times of desolation to help wean us off unhealthy attachments in our lives. I trusted this to be true because I trust my spiritual director's expertise in this area, and because there is over 400 years of documented experience of God working like this with many people.

But that still didn't make it easy to accept. This went against so much about God that I had been taught and internalized.

How could I feel abandoned by a God I knew as all-loving?

How could abandonment be a method of God's love? Would God really act this way?

At that point I had to just go on in faith, trusting my head knowledge that a good God was still out there somewhere and still cared about me, even though I was not feeling it right then. It turns out God was doing a new thing in my life, and I had a choice whether to be open to that or not.

II. So let me begin this message on Open-mindedness with a simple question: *Why should we be open-minded?*

A. Let's look at the surprising God shown to us by Jeremiah

1. We all have images of God that we have somehow acquired over the years, whether from sermons or religious films or our parents ...

a) In theology books, they use big words to describe the attributes of God that 2000 years of Christian history have produced, e.g.:

God is omnipotent (all powerful)

God is omniscient (all knowing)

God is omnipresent (present everywhere at the same time)

- b) Some of you may have grown up with another of these fancy descriptions of God: *immutable*

That means “not capable or susceptible to change”

In other words, lots of Christians have proclaimed that for God to be trustworthy and utterly beyond us, then it means God cannot change, cannot be made to change, and would never change

Some have taken the immutability of God even further, declaring that the mind of an all-knowing and unchanging God could never change, and never be subject to influence by people

2. So the 1st answer to why we should be open-minded, is because God is open-minded

- a) Some of us have believed that God changing God’s mind just can’t be, because it would demonstrate a fickle God whom we cannot trust

- b) But look at what happens in this message and symbolic action that comes to the prophet Jeremiah from God:

3. In Old Testament times, it was common for prophets to not only receive messages or visions from God, but even commands to perform public actions that would serve as object lessons

- a) So we have the story of Jeremiah going down to the house of the local potter, because God tells him to.

Once there, he observes the potter hard at work, forming a vessel on the wheel from clay

But something goes wrong in that shaping, and the vessel turns out bad. In a word: it’s worthless, unusable for the potter’s purposes

So the potter starts from scratch with that same clay, pressing it together and reshaping it into something better and more useful

- b) Then, beyond the symbolic action in the text, God gives Jeremiah some explanation of the implications of this lesson for God’s people:

that God has the freedom and the right to change God’s mind about plans God has for peoples or nations, but ...

It depends on whether those peoples are obedient to God or not.

B. In other words, we see that God can change God’s mind!

1. God can be open-minded and be influenced by human actions! Therefore we should also be open-minded.

2. If even our awesome Creator God is willing to be touched and influenced by created beings, isn’t open-mindedness something we as God’s people should aspire to?

III. A second response to why we should be open-minded is because our hope hinges on it!

A. With that, let's turn to our text today from Hebrews chapter 3, which speaks to being open-minded toward God,

1. In what is basically his sermon in the form of a letter, the writer of Hebrews has just been comparing Moses and Jesus.

a) He holds up both Moses and Jesus as faithful leaders of what he calls “God’s house”, which is referring to the broad community of faithful believers in Christ

b) After stating that, from the position of being God’s own son, Christ was faithful to God’s house, the writer quickly brings us the reader into this picture by declaring that WE are God’s house!

c) My Waterford brothers and sisters who are sitting at home right now, we used to worship together in this very sanctuary that some would call the “house of God” for the Waterford congregation.

2. But my friends, Hebrews 3:6 tells us that wherever we are right now, scattered and isolated as we are, WE ARE GOD’S HOUSE!

a) I think that’s exciting, that God no longer dwells in a temple somewhere, or in any church sanctuary, but in God’s own faithful people!

b) Even if you’ve been missing seeing others from church in this church building, you can still rejoice because WE ARE GOD’S HOUSE!

B. But verse 6 ends with a condition – We are God’s house IF ...

1. Ahh, so what’s the condition? What do we need to do in order to fully own that statement that “we are God’s house”?

2. It tells us we need to hold fast, to hold firm ...

a) In times as shaky and uncertain as now, it’s no guarantee that we can hold firm to anything!

A lot of things that we used to take for granted in our home lives, our church life, in our local community and in our nation now feel like they’re up for grabs

Life as we knew it for most of us is still largely recognizable, but it feels like the ground is still shifting under our feet.

b) And when we don’t have firm footing underneath us, what do we do? We hold firm to something ... find a handhold, grab onto something trusted that will steady us (a railing or a piece of furniture...)

IV. In this Hebrews 3 passage, there are two central exhortations to us ... 2 actions that this preacher calls for, from us who are “God’s house”

A. “Holding firm” is the first of those 2 exhortations.

1. “Holding firm” appears in v. 6, at the beginning of what we read, and then for emphasis, it’s repeated at the end in v. 14.

2. Now “holding firm” is a verb demanding an object. What is it we’re holding firm to, which qualifies us to be “God’s house”??

a) There are 2 things: 1st, We hold firm to confidence

Confidence in our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, no matter how shaky the world around us looks

Confidence in God who through Jesus destroyed the Evil One and the power of death itself

b) And we also hold firm to boasting -- Wait, wait ... boasting? Humble Mennonites have been taught never to boast. So how do you hold firm to something that you try NOT to do?

In Greek, this verse says more literally, “the boasting about hope” or “the glorying based on hope”

So first of all, this verse isn’t trying to convince us to start boasting or glorying in something. It assumes that, as Christian believers we already have something to boast or glory about!

(a) And indeed we do! In the darkness of winter, we just celebrated Christ the light of the world being born!

(b) And Christ the light of the world is still shining brightly in 2021, even under the shadow of a deadly pandemic, a faltering economy and political chaos!

(c) The power of our crucified Savior will never be eclipsed by all these principalities and powers! As we declared together on the Longest Night, on Christmas Eve and at Epiphany:

In Him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness ... has ... not ... overcome it!

John 1:4-5 NIV

c) THAT, my friends, is the hope that our glorying, our boasting is based upon!

B. The other exhortation at the heart of this passage is captured well in v. 12: (*read*) This is basically a repeat of the lines quoted from Ps. 95 where it says, “Do not harden your hearts ...”

1. A more positive way to say it is, “Keep your hearts tender and in touch with God’s ways”

a) The call is not only for us as individual readers to not turn away from the living God, but it’s also a call for mutual aid within “God’s house” ...

b) We are urged to encourage one other daily, as long as it is still called “today” ... Have you encouraged someone from church recently ... encouraged them to stay on the path of discipleship and hold firm to God’s ways? Take that opportunity today, in a text, an email, a card!

c) So let me not lose my opportunity, while we’re still in “today”:

Dear Waterford friends, I know we’re all getting weary of living under COVID.

It can be exhausting these days just trying to maintain some semblance of normalcy when our nerves are frayed, our bodies are tired, we feel socially deprived and perhaps spiritually hungry

I urge you to take to heart the Apostle Paul's words to the Galatian church: *“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”* Gal. 6:9, NIV

2. Turning back to Hebrews 3, not hardening our hearts is another way of telling us to be open-minded toward whatever God may be saying and doing.

a) That's relatively easy to accept in the abstract. But we don't live in a world of abstract conflict or abstract diversity:

We live in a polarized and polarizing world, where we are pushed to see everything in dualistic ways, as either ...

black or white, right or wrong, us or them, win or lose

b) Being tender-hearted and open-minded toward God in today's world is exceedingly difficult. That's because I believe God calls us to hold lightly 2 things that we tend to clutch very tightly:

The rightness of our own actions & beliefs. We are so convinced that WE have the truth and WE are not deceived by sin ... that it's only THOSE people who have gone astray

Certainty about what God will do, or how God must act. We have clear ideas about what the Bible says and about how God works, but such rock-sure certainty limits God's freedom to do new things

c) Open-mindedness means holding these certainties lightly, but without abandoning our beliefs

V. Conclusion

A. Brothers & sisters, it's easy to feel discouraged these days, but we can find hope in Christ in 2021 (through COVID & beyond) if we do 2 paradoxical things:

1. First is to hold firm in our faith: hold firm in the confidence and the legitimate boasting that we have in the Christian hope
2. Second is, at the same time, to keep our hearts tender, & in touch with God's ways: when anger, impatience and cynicism are on the rise, let us beware not to harden our hearts

B. The light of Jesus Christ in our world today still brings hope when so much to us appears dark.

1. Let us hold fast to the confidence and glory that hope brings!
2. And let our tender hearts and open minds be ever receptive to the familiar and the surprising things God is doing. Amen.