

**“This Love Lasts Forever”**

*Northminster Presbyterian Church: Ordinary 5, Year B (2012)*

*The lessons: Isaiah 40<sup>21-31</sup>; Mark 1<sup>29-39</sup>*

What do you put your faith in? Have you ever lost your faith? Have you ever run into one of those periods of life where you feel more doubtful than faithful? Faith is critical to the human experience. George Michael sang about it, as did Sting. Movies are made about it, or its absence. A few weeks ago, there was a story in the news about atheists in the military wanting their own chaplain. Yes. Chaplain. The question is not do we have faith, but what we put our faith in. In today's culture, we have several gods to choose from: Some of us put our faith in government, other put it in ourselves, sex is always a favorite. With today being Super Bowl Sunday, football widows are glad their husbands will no longer be worshipping at their particular altar. At least for a while. ☺ I heard an advertisement this week from an investment firm that said in today's tumultuous economy, shouldn't you put your faith in gold? Everyone has faith in something.

In the ancient Near East, the authority of gods was found in warfare: Two groups of people would get together and duke it out, and whoever won was believed to worship the superior god. The conquered were expected to worship the god or gods of the conquering. So, in the sixth century, the Babylonians bested the Jews, and the Babylonians worshipped a god named Marduk. The Jews experienced a real crisis of faith: Is our God real? Is he dependable? Can he rescue us from despair? If so, why hasn't he? The Jews, exiled and far from home, were tempted to desert their faith. But before we are too critical of them for such doubts, let's remember that they suffered atrocities we never have; in addition, Christ himself asked some pretty disturbing questions on his cross. And, too, these questions are really no different than the ones we've asked from time to time: Can God save this relationship? Is God here in this hospital room? Why does God allow poverty? Has God abandoned us? Can he make Barack Obama and Rush Limbaugh get along?

Enter Isaiah. The first thing the prophet does is to ask some rhetorical questions: Do you not know who we're talking about here? This is no weak or uncertain god. This God isn't some Shakespearean Puck who is fickle and mischievous, or some Norse Loki who is vindictive and cruel, or some American god like materialism who takes and takes and gives nothing back. No, this God is the one God who laid the foundations of the earth and sits above the canopy of heaven and names each of the multitudinous starry hosts. This is the God who speaks and the inhabitants of the earth tremble. This is the God who has no equal.

God's people have trouble remembering that. We look at the past and think we know how it could be fixed: Kyle Williams should have held on to that ball. If he had, the 49ers would be in the Super Bowl now. Maryland had UNC down by nine points. They should have thrust in the dagger, instead of letting the 'Heels back in it. And Mitt should have never made that stupid comment about not caring about the poor. That's armchair quarterbacking, and we're awesome at it. The Hebrews are armchair quarterbacking. They're looking at the past and questioning what God has done and why

he has done it. But instead of answering their questions, God simply replies: I don't fit your understanding and your preconceptions. I don't grow tired, I don't give out, and I don't lose. But I do show favor to the weak. I do lift up the melancholy. I do steady the stumbling. But I cannot possibly fit into your ideas about what you think I should do.

This idea is driven home by the almost juxtaposition of two images in our lesson—the grasshopper and the eagle. The grasshopper only hops a few inches at a time and can only see the immediate vicinity. The eagle flies for miles and can see the horizon. We're grasshoppers. We hop along thinking we've got all the answers, when we really see precious little. When we humble ourselves unto our Lord, he begins to raise us up like eagles. Christians, in our day and age it may appear that God is on the way out. Scientists argue against him, celebrities ignore him, even the religious argue about him. It would be easy to see the tides of secularism inundating the faithful. It would be easy to doubt and waver, especially in the troubling moments of life when we don't see the hand of God at work. But think on this: Six hundred years before Christ, the Babylonians took the Jews hostage. The Babylonians thought they won and they thought their god was better. But there are still Jews today; there are no Babylonians. God sustains his people even when times are dark. God sustains his people precisely when times are dark. When things are going well for you, be sure to stop often and long to give thanks to God who blesses you richly. But when things are difficult and obstacles prevail upon you and belief seems like a labor too great, know that the God who carved the mountains into the earth is the same God who knit you together in the womb. The rock band U2 has a song in which they quote part of this morning's lesson. What's funny is that the song is called "Drowning Man", and it recounts Peter's crisis of faith as he walks across the water to the Lord. That must be telling. Even in our darkest moments, especially when faith seems to waver, we are lifted up. The refrain of the song is "This love lasts forever." Indeed, it does. God's promise is that we are never alone, the false gods of the world have no power over us, this love lasts forever and nothing in this world can change that. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

