

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Stumbling: Those Who Are Wavering”

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Jude 17-25

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Today we conclude our series “Stumbling,” this look at the messiness of faith. We’ve explored the doubts and struggles even failings we face both as individuals, but also in the past few weeks as the church together.

So before we get to our passage as we wrap up this particular series, a word on what’s coming up.

Next Sunday, we’ll celebrate World Communion Sunday. If you’re not familiar with it, each year we celebrate the global scope of Christ’s church and, with it, our connection with the body of Christ all across the world. We’ll welcome Rev. Mary Nebelsick from Presbyterian World Mission as our guest next week as she shares from the pulpit.

The following week, we’ll start a new series called, succinctly, “It’s Like,” and for much of October and November we’ll look at Jesus’ teaching in one of his favorite ways on one of his favorite topics: parables on the kingdom of heaven.

Today, though, as we finish up this look at the messiness of faith, we come to the brief, often overlooked letter of Jude, and with it, a word of caution and guidance, because the stumbling never stops, at least not until the end. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

¹⁷ But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; ¹⁸ for they said to you, ‘In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.’ ¹⁹ It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. ²⁰ But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. ²² And have mercy on some who are wavering; ²³ save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

²⁴ Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, ²⁵ to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

The name of David Koresh, at least for the past twenty years, has stood as a cautionary tale, of the perils of unmoored, unchecked teaching.

Just at the mention of the name, some of you may already know the story. It's pretty sad, definitely frightening.

For a time, Koresh was the leader of a fringe 'Christian' movement known as the Branch Davidians. I use 'scare quotes' around 'Christian' there because there are any number of reasons why it'd be a stretch to consider them Christian, per se.

The Branch Davidians, named after a couple of references in Zechariah, didn't start with David Koresh, though Koresh and what happened made them infamous. Nevertheless, before Koresh started running things, its leaders were still known for, among other things, predicting the apocalypse, claiming to see signs of the end times fulfilled not just in the world but right in their backyard, and calling their followers to respond appropriately.

It was in the 80s when Koresh showed up, just in his early 20s at the time, and quickly became influential in the movement. After some of the original leaders passed away, there was a power struggle between Koresh and one other guy, leading up to, allegedly, a "resurrection contest." Apparently that meant that somebody exhumed a corpse, and whoever was able to raise the body from the dead first won. It ended in a draw.

Eventually, Koresh won that power struggle, took over leadership, and settled in at the movement's headquarters at a place called the Mount Carmel Center outside of Waco, Texas.

Once there, more and more people were drawn to him. He was charismatic and appealing. He taught with certainty, not just about the Bible or theology, but more to the point, that the Mount Carmel Center in Waco, Texas, would be the site of the biblical prophecies' fulfillment and that he himself was the subject of those prophecies, the Messiah, God's anointed.

As such, he felt divinely led to produce messianic offspring, and in obedience to this leading, taught his followers that he was entitled to as many as 140 wives, including some women who themselves were already married to other members of the movement.

As it turns out, his name wasn't even David Koresh. His real name was Vernon Howell—no relation. He changed his name to David Koresh—"David" in reference to the messianic line of King David in the Bible, and "Koresh," the biblical name of the Persian Emperor Cyrus, who himself is identified in Isaiah as God's "Messiah."

Rumors started trickling out of the Mount Carmel Center, drawing the attention of the authorities. Allegations of polygamy, abuse, and stockpiling illegal weapons started swirling around Koresh.

Things came to a head in 1993 when federal authorities tried to raid the compound, which led to a nearly two-month-long standoff. The final assault that brought it to a close culminated in a firefight between federal agents and the Branch Davidians, leading to the death of David Koresh, along with dozens of other men, women, and children who were caught inside as the building burned to the ground.

It's not a happy story, but I share it with you today because if you think about David Koresh and all the frightening aspects of his rise to influence within his movement, his lack of accountability, and the abuse of his position of spiritual leadership, you may have a good idea of the sort of influence the Letter of Jude is cautioning against.

“But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; for they said to you, ‘In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.’ It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions” (vv. 17-18). That's just picking up in the middle of this short letter, but it's building on what Jude has just written about some teachers who had infiltrated the church, individuals who, according to him, were posing as prophets and, by virtue of their prophetic status, claimed to be free of any kind of moral accountability or restraint.

In general, the Letter of Jude is a word of caution to the early church. It's possible this is one of the earlier letters we have. Jude, as he himself identifies, was the brother of James, another leader in the early church, but also, if we're talking about the right James and Jude, technically Jude was a half-brother of Jesus.

So, Jude, as a leader in the early church, is seeing these “intruders,” as he calls them, come in and distort and mislead and divide the fellowship that is the heritage of his brother's life and ministry, and not just his brother's ministry, his brother's very *body*, the church, the body of Christ. It's a family thing. That's one reason he's speaking out so strongly against them.

But it's not just Jude that's facing this problem. All over the letters of the New Testament, you have writers like Jude, John, Peter, and Paul all warning against false teaching. I mean, my goodness, a decent amount of Paul's letters deals with Paul circling back to churches he had already planted or guided, only to find that someone else had come in after him and stirred up all kinds of mess that he has to clean up again. Why was this?

Well, on one hand, that sort of thing is always going to happen. There will always be some who, for one reason or another, have a deluded sense of their own importance and will attempt to draw others to themselves.

But on the other, why did it seem to plague these early generations of the church so much?

Well, I would offer that it's the other side of the coin of the sort of messiness that we've been talking about the past three weeks.

You'll remember that as we went through that story in the Book of Acts, of Peter seemingly going by the seat of his pants from one place to another, finally to meet Cornelius, where he witnesses the Spirit coming upon Gentiles—astonishing—and how that blew the lid off of all his assumptions about how God was supposed to be at work. It was a messy road, leading up to that point, but we saw how in the early church there was an embrace of what the Spirit revealed to be *new*. It's a calling not to stifle how the Spirit could be guiding us to move forward, especially if that way forward is astonishing or frightening or goes against what our assumptions had been. That's the positive side of the coin.

Then there's the other side of it. If the church took on this posture of openness to what new directions the Spirit could be leading, then if something (or someone) comes around offering something *new*, then maybe folks would be a little too eager to wonder whether that's where the Spirit is leading. And what Jude is saying is, "Well, no."

That brings up a powerful lesson for us, almost to temper everything we've been talking about the past few weeks about the messiness of faith. If something is new or unexpected or astonishing, does that mean it's faithful? Well, according to Jude, no. Not necessarily. Sometimes quite the opposite. Sometimes that which is new or unexpected is quite unfaithful, even dangerous.

A couple of weeks ago after our 8:45 service, Phil Campbell and I chatted briefly, and he offered a great question. After hearing the word of the Book of Acts, all about following the Spirit, even to unexpected places, he asked, "So how do you know it's of the Spirit?" And ain't that the question! How do you know that something is of God? And then how do you know if it's not?

It's not just an idle question for reflection. The very health of the church, of our faith, is at stake here. If we're worried about stumbling, whether as individuals or together as a church, this is a huge deal. It's something I think about a lot. In fact in the letter of James, it actually says, "Not many of you should become teachers, because you know that we who teach shall be judged more strictly than others." So not just out of concern for the spiritual health of our church but also for the sake of my own hide, yeah, this is something I think about.

Jude does give us some indicators, a few signposts. If a teacher or if a teaching is, to use Jude's language, "indulgent," "devoid of the Spirit," "causing division," then let the believer and the church beware.

Fortunately, Jude also gives us some indicators in the other direction, how to tell what is of God, what is of the Spirit, what is faithful: that which “builds up,” that which is steeped in prayer in the Spirit, that which keeps in the love of God, that which hopes in the mercy and grace of Christ. Plenty of other signposts throughout Scripture, but those are just a few that Jude offers here at the end of his letter.

And I hope that comes as at least some good news to you, to give you some idea of how to navigate whatever the next thing may be in faith for you. Could be something in school, could be something at work, could be something at home, something that you wonder, I don’t know what to do? And that’s kind of a generic question, so a bit more specific, I don’t know what God would want me to do. I don’t know how to faithfully follow Jesus in this particular instance. Some of you may be in that boat right now, right this very morning. You’re faced with a quandary, and you don’t know what the faithful thing to do is, and you’re scared to death of making the wrong choice, of falling, of stumbling, maybe stumbling yet again.

So to you I would offer this, look for: What builds up? What is in prayer? What keeps in the love of God? What hopes in the grace of Christ? These are the signposts forward, the steps away from stumbling.

But maybe more importantly, I would offer a further word of hope, just from the way Jude ends his letter. First, that he calls upon us all to “have mercy on some who are wavering,” acknowledging that faith is not an assembly line. You don’t hop on at one point and then get carried through to enlightenment. It’s more like Chutes and Ladders. You climb, but then slide, and then climb, and then slide, and sometimes that can feel infuriating, both as one who is on that journey or as one witnessing the journey of another. And so Jude says, “Have mercy.” Let’s show ourselves a bit of grace and patience as we walk this messy road of faith.

But then finally, this walk we make, seeking to be faithful, isn’t one in which we’re just trying to get better and better at decision-making. We’re seeking after Christ, and I’ll let you in on a secret.

As I have sought Christ in my own life, as I have sought to know him better, as I have sought to follow his ways, it seems the more deeply I am aware of all the ways I am not, the more keenly aware I am of all the ways I fall short and stumble.

But the walk of faith, as Jude tells us, is not about our finding a way to walk perfectly, but rather seeking a faithful way, as he puts it, in “him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing.” In “him who is able to keep you from falling.”

When it seems like the stumbling never stops, take heart, because we are being led by the one who will one day remove all obstacles from our path.

“To the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”