

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI  
Embracing Faith: Focus  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
January 15, 2023

[Watch Sermon](#)

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[2 Kings 21:1-9; Matthew 4:1-11](#)

It was our daughter's first time to drive without either her mother or I in the car, though her older brother was with her. Andy was with her because in Texas they have graduated driver's licenses which state that for the first six months for a driver under 18, they cannot have anyone under 18 as their only passenger and must have someone over 18 in the car. Katie wanted to go to a friend's house and neither Cindy nor I were available. Fortunately, Andy was home from college and agreed to ride along, bring the car home, and then go to get her. As they were almost to their destination Katie decided to change the station on the radio. Glancing down, all she heard was Andy yelling, "Katie, watch out!" but it was too late. The parked car came out of nowhere and Katie ran right into the rear, left quarter fender. She was devastated and burst into tears. Andy, being the good older brother, went to the house where the car was parked, spoke with the owner, exchanged insurance information, and then drove Katie home. The good news was that there was little damage, and no one was hurt. But for Katie, it was a valuable lesson in the need to stay focused.

Staying focused is something that we are not always good at. I say this because as human beings we are easily distracted ... squirrels ... and those distractions are what often cause us to crash, literally, figuratively, and spiritually. Every year more than 3,000 people are killed in accidents involving distracted drivers. We all know the distracted drill when our minds wander: our phones ring, we think of a text we need to return, we reach to tune the radio, we think about work, kids, home, the shopping list rather than the road ahead. And it is not just in the car. It happens at work, at home, stepping off a curb. I would argue that this happens because our brains have not evolved to filter all the information that is coming at us through all our senses. And this is true regarding our faith as well. I say this because faith is not a thing, or a doctrine, or an affirmation of particular beliefs, though those are all part of faith. I have said this probably too many times, but it bears repeating, and that is that faith is faithfulness. Faith is a journey of faithfulness. Faith is about living a particular type of life as followers of Jesus. And that kind of faith takes focus.

This concept of staying focused is what is at the heart of both our stories this morning. The story from 2 Kings, is about a king named Manasseh. Manasseh was the son of king Hezekiah, who had tried his best to stay focused on being faithful to YHWH, the God of his ancestors. After his father's death, Manasseh was faced with the difficult task of trying to be faithful to YHWH while also being a client state of the Assyrian Empire. While difficult, it would have been possible. Yet Manasseh allowed himself to be distracted by the pomp, and power of the Assyrians. So rather than focus on faithfulness to YHWH he focused on being faithful to the gods of Assyria. This led him off the path of YHWH and into a dangerous and destructive path, where he not only set up altars to other gods in the Temple in Jerusalem, but he sacrificed his own sons to please the gods. And evidently the people followed him in these practices. This is what can happen when God's people lose focus. We end up embracing practices that are antithetical to God's desire for God's people.

Focus is also at the heart of the story out of Matthew. In this story, each of the temptations is an attempt to get Jesus to stop focusing on his mission and to focus instead on himself. I say this because Jesus' antagonist is attempting to get Jesus to lose focus on his mission and focus on himself. The first distraction is hunger. "Hey Jesus," the devil says, "You look famished. You know that you don't have to fast. You are

worth using your powers to cook up something good. Forget focusing on God's plans for you. Think about yourself. Look in the vanity mirror and say, 'I'm worth it.'" The second has to do with fame. Again, the devil says, "Look Jesus, no one knows who you are. And if no one knows who you are then how can they follow you? What you need is a good Instagram moment that will get you on Galilee's Got Talent. All you need to do is go to the top of the Temple, jump off, angels will catch you and you'll be famous. Look in the vanity mirror and say, 'I'm worth it.'" The last temptation is about power. The devil says, "Jesus, if you are going to change the world, you are going to need power. I have all the power you want. In fact, I run this place. All you need to do is focus on me, and you will have all the power you need. Just look in the vanity mirror and say, 'I'm worth it.'"

Lest we think Jesus had an easy time dealing with these temptations, we shouldn't. We shouldn't because the language used in the Gospel is that he was tempted, or tested, which meant that the outcome of invitations to distraction was not preordained. Jesus had to work at staying focused. And he does so by returning to the Spiritual GPS, the story of God's people. He does so because the story offers us a path to faithfulness. Each of these responses is a reminder to Jesus of what is at the heart of faith and faithfulness. Jesus first refers to the Words of God, or the TANAK, meaning the entire word of God because it shows what faithfulness looks like. In the second temptation he focuses on a single faithful response, we don't test God, meaning faithfulness is following God, not testing God. Finally, Jesus returns to the Shema, which says we are to worship the Lord alone. His responses are, I will not look into the vanity mirror, but I will look to the story. I will look to the words and ways of God.

You and I can stay focused in the same way if we are willing to allow God's story to speak to us in a regular and intentional way. I realize that for many of us, the thought of somehow keeping the entire scripture in front of us is not practical. The scriptures are sometimes complex and difficult to wrap our heads around. This is why we, at Everybody's Church, created the Five Part Story. The Five Part Story is our way of allowing people to remember and focus on the critical pieces of God's story. They go like this: Part 1 is, God loves the world. We focus on the fact that God's love for us and all other people is real and alive. Part 2 is, We Wander Far from God. We focus on the fact that we are not perfect, lose focus, and so need to return our focus to God's story. Part 3 is, God Chooses a Family. We focus on the fact that God has initiated a relationship with us as a part of God's larger rescue plan for the world; that we have a responsibility to bless the world. Part 4 is, Jesus is the Way to God. We focus on Jesus as the one who shows us the way to be faithful. Part 5 is, the Spirit Helps us Live God's Love. We focus on the presence of the Spirit who is with us to empower our faithfulness; that when we wonder if we can be faithful, the Spirit is there to help us.

My challenge for all of us this week is this, to ask ourselves, "How am I practicing focusing on Christ, by remembering the story of our faith?"