

Tuning In To God: Being Strong & Courageous - Sunday 29th October 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, we started off our series, Tuning Into God, nine weeks ago. A while ago, isn't it? And I thought it might be good to start this morning just to briefly reflect back over that.

So Ruth started us off by sharing this idea of my sheep hear my voice with an assurance, a promise that as we tune in, we will hear God's voice as individuals.

That's a good place, isn't it, to start. And then Dave explored the idea of testing God's voice. You know, is that what we're hearing?

And he looked at the story of Elijah and how Elijah heard God, not in the earthquake and not in the wind, not in the fire, but in a whisper.

Just as God whispers to us that he knows and loves us. And then Matt asked, what does God sound like? Looking at how Jesus speaks to us in all sorts of different ways from this song, Sunshine on Leith, to that quiet kind of internal voice that we can talk and walk with and go even deeper asking questions.

[1 : 16] And then I took a look at expecting unexpected voices, thinking about the God nudges that often take us by surprise, whether that was Colin in Rev or Paul's unexpected encounter with Lydia by the river in Philippi.

And it's always rooted in inclusion. And then Kim sharing what it means to take off the earmuffs and asking God to help break down the walls of fear and shame and unforgiveness and sin in our lives.

And all those things that block us from being able to hear God's voice of loving kindness. And then Matt again on listening on location and the importance of allowing God to speak to us through our locations.

Whether that's in a tent or up a tree or in a mountain or the seashore, wherever we are, God speaks to us. And then Ruth praying for direction, seeking God's guidance by sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him through gut feelings, inner peace, in community, and most importantly by the fruit that a right way of living produces.

And then, last week, Matt talked about interpreting the signs of the times, recognizing what's going on in the world around us and asking God to speak to us through that.

[2 : 55] And as an example, he looked at the issue of loneliness and how we might respond to that. So we've covered a lot of ground and a lot of very different topics.

And hopefully, hopefully it's been a good opportunity for us to reflect on all these different ways that we can tune in. And to know that even in those times when we're not actively kind of out there looking for God, he is always looking for us.

Ruth started the series with Psalm 23, I think. That's the passage she used. And at the end of the psalm, the psalmist says this, You know, the follow me bit isn't really a great translation.

The Hebrew root word is radaf, which means to pursue or to chase. It's a much, much more active word.

So God's goodness and mercy isn't just sort of passively bumbling along behind us. It's actively pursuing, chasing, running after us.

[4 : 25] It's quite an image, isn't it? That the goodness of God is running after us. I think someone wrote a song about that. It's a picture, isn't it, of the father abandoning any sense of pride.

You know, rushing out to embrace his lost child. And, you know, to be honest, it's not a very dignified picture of God, is it?

And yet, that's the one that Jesus gives us. You know, sometimes I think we just need to tweak the dial a little to take out the static.

You know, to be able to tune in as we embrace the one who loves us and allow him to break into our everyday lives and maybe give us sometimes a gentle nudge and sometimes a firmer push.

Maybe to get our attention. Maybe to reassure us, to comfort us, to challenge us, to warn us, to point us away from making poor or bad choices that inevitably have consequences.

[5 : 47] Hopefully to speak to us, to guide us. And as we've seen through this whole series of talks, that is always, always aligned with the nature and character of Jesus and what he said and where the spirit leads.

And so joy and generosity and peace and kindness and gentleness and faithfulness and self-control, they're always the hallmarks then of that.

I think one thing maybe that I've come to learn over the years is that in between the black and white stuff of life, right and wrong things, which there are, there's an awful lot of grey.

You know, things are often very nuanced and complex and sometimes there isn't just one clear way ahead. Sometimes we have to wait, we have to learn to be patient.

Sometimes it's not so easy to discern where God is leading us. You know, the road kind of forks. Different situations present themselves and we have to make a choice.

[7 : 16] And hopefully, it's out of two good things, but sometimes it's choices that may very well mean they're going to be difficult. It means that we're going to have to trust that God does work all things for good.

And I wonder at those times if it's about having the strength and the courage to kind of step up and step out. You know, even when it's not easy, even if we end up looking a bit silly.

Now, I know Christmas is a little bit of a way off yet, but there's a lovely little story I think illustrates this about a children's nativity play. So, the three children playing the wise men are standing at the side of the stage with their gifts.

And the first one comes on and walks up to Mary and Joseph, kneeling before the manger, and he lays down a brightly wrapped box and says, I am the king of the north, and I bring you gold.

Julie drops off his box. And then the second little boy comes up, and again, kneeling before the manger, he lays down a large colored jar, and he says, I am the king of the south.

[8 : 38] And I bring you myrrh. And then the third little boy comes on, carrying a small silver bowl. And as he gets up to Mary and Joseph, he just freezes, absolutely freezes.

He's completely forgotten. He's one and only lion. And his parents, who are sitting on the front row, are just willing, urging him, to say this one line.

And he can see, etched on the poor little boy's face, he's desperately, desperately trying to remember his line. And then all of a sudden, a beaming smile breaks out on his face.

And he turns to Mary, and he says, Frank sent this. I know. I know it's a bit corny. But here's the thing.

Sometimes you just have to give it your best shot. And yeah, it might not be right. But maybe having the courage to step up and step out, maybe that's more important.

[9 : 45] At the end of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is reaching the end of his life. He spent 40 years in the wilderness with the children of Israel, bringing them out of Egypt.

And they've been wandering around and around and around the desert, lost in so many ways. And now Moses stands on top of Mount Nebo and he gets to look out over the land.

But he will never get to enter it. That task will fall upon Joshua. So let me just pick up the story in Joshua chapter one.

I'm just going to read verses seven to nine. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law.

My servant Moses gave you. Do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.

[10 : 56] Keep this book of the law always on your lips. Meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.

And then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid.

Do not be discouraged. For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. Amen. Amen. So in this passage, God's command to Joshua and to the people he's leading is to be strong and very courageous.

To keep the law always on their lips, meditating on it day and night. Now I've spoken before, I'm sure we've talked about it before as well at times in church, about the Shema.

You know, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And that is what they are to meditate on.

[12 : 08] And later on in the Gospels, in fulfillment of this, Jesus says, and so love your neighbor as yourself. And sadly, not always, but too often, being strong, being courageous, I think, is equated with showing strength, being tough, overcoming others through sheer determination and strength of will.

And too often, haven't we seen that sort of played out in the political arena? You know, on both sides, it doesn't seem sometimes to be enough room for humility, for truth, or compassion, or kindness, or dignity.

And grace. Because too often, it's about power. Either holding on to it, or trying to get hold of it. You know, I can't, I can't help but think about the events unfolding in Israel and Gaza at the moment.

And just like you, I am sickened and appalled by the horrific, by the horrific, by the horrific, barbaric murders that Hamas terrorists inflicted on innocent civilians.

And, you know, I won't even pretend to try and imagine the trauma and the outrage and the grief that their families must be feeling. But I'm pretty sure doing this isn't what God means when he says be strong and courageous.

[13 : 57] I don't think this will solve the problems that Israel faces. You know, there are some Israeli survivors and family members of the Hamas massacre that have spoken out against the bombardment unintentionally or otherwise of civilians in Gaza.

And one of those, Yotam Kipnis, whose parents were murdered on the 7th of October, said this, do not write my father's name on any of the shells.

So what does it mean then to be strong and courageous? You know, weakness isn't really a trait any of us want to be associated with, is it?

And yet, the willing sacrifice, death and resurrection of Jesus fundamentally changes what success and winning actually means.

And it's not really what people want to hear. When I am weak, Paul says in 2 Corinthians, then I am strong.

[15 : 18] And I think Paul recognised that his weaknesses were the very things that allowed God to work in and through his life.

And in our Bible reading, God wasn't asking the Israelites to do something easy. They were about to embark on a whole new life in a new land.

And so, don't you think they were a little bit frightened? You know the most frequent command of all in the Bible?

It goes something like this. Do not be afraid for I am with you. There's at least, probably more, but at least 366 different variations of that in the Bible.

And why? Because we need, don't we? We need a constant reminder that God is present with us because we do get fearful.

[16 : 30] We get scared. We get, we can feel like we are alone. And God says, no, no, I'm right here with you and it's in my strength, not in yours.

I think it's in our nature, isn't it, that when we're frightened, we want to get back control.

Actually, what often happens is that when we get really frightened, that fear turns into anger. And then we want to lash out. We want control, but God, it turns out, wants vulnerability.

You know, the only way to overcome the fear is to lean in more and more into God, to trust, to embrace his grace that is so outrageously generous.

It's scandalous. The theologian and writer Thomas Merton wrote this, our minds see evil as black and white.

[17 : 49] And the only solution is to eliminate evil. Nonviolence, on the other hand, comes from an awareness that I am also the enemy.

And my response is part of the moral equation. religion. And so I cannot destroy the other without destroying myself.

And so I must embrace my enemy just as much as I must welcome my own shadow, the dark side of me. I think that takes strength.

I think that takes real and lasting courage. We come to God, we tune into God, not by being strong in ourselves, but by acknowledging our weaknesses.

Not by needing to prove that we are right, but by being gracious enough to recognize our own failings. Not through our own self-sufficiency, but in humility.

[19 : 01] Christianity. Jesus didn't come to start a new religion called Christianity. He came to be a living example of what God's kingdom of hope and of love and humility and compassion and forgiveness and healing looks like.

And he was willing to give up his own life to make that possible for us, to challenge us, to dare us to step into that kingdom on a journey that changes not just us, but those around us.

There are no promises that it will be either safe or easy, but filled with God's spirit, we are given both the strength and the courage to do that and the assurance that he is with us always to the very end of the age.

Amen. So we will have a time of worship, but let's just pray. So Lord, we wait on you present in this moment right now.

help us to hear your voice, your prompting in the quiet and the stillness.

[20 : 40] Forgive us all of the thoughts and the words and the actions that might separate us from you. you give us the strength and the courage to turn away from focusing our lives on just ourselves and to be more open and more vulnerable to you.

And any fear that we might have help us to hold on to your promise that you never leave us or forsake us. You are always with us to the very end of the age.

for there is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear. And Lord, as we watch the humanitarian crisis spiraling out of control in Gaza, we hear the fears and cries of the families and relatives of those being held hostage by Hamas in Gaza.

We ask your spirit to draw close and be a comfort for those whose hope is failing. Lord, I pray that both sides in this conflict, even now, would bring a ceasefire to the attacks, that a sustainable humanitarian corridor might be opened for food and water and medical supplies to get through, to help just stop the spread of disease.

We pray for the aid agencies trying to alleviate suffering for the thousands trapped in Gaza, and particularly the many thousands of children caught up in this conflict.

[22 : 37] need. And we pray for the lives of the hostages held by Hamas, that they would be released, reunited with their families.

Lord Jesus, we pray for restraint on all sides, an openness towards peace for all, and a real solution for the occupation in the West Bank and the situation in Gaza.

And Lord, as impossible as that might seem, as we know military vehicles and tanks, right at this very moment, are rolling across. Yet we still ask that your peace might reign in that country.

Closer to Home, we thank you for the work and passion of all those involved in reaching out and helping others, the Food Bank, Pathway Project, and Light for Children, the Drop-In, Talking Point, Creating Space, Little Friends, and the many, many other different groups helping to connect and make a difference in the lives of people in our community here.

We pray for those in our own families and those we know who are finding things tough at the moment, struggling financially, recovering from or battling ongoing illness, mourning the loss of loved ones.

[24 : 21] Lord, we ask for your healing and your comfort and your protection and love to surround all those in need of this time. Thank you.

thank you for all the good things and good people you bring into our lives. Thank you that you care for each one of us, that you hear our prayers.

So, merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.