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Sermon Transcript: Faith in the Waves

Well, it was really nice taking a couple of weeks off and going on vacation with my family. We headed down to Florida where my daughter just got a new job there. And so, some good time of reconnecting and relaxing. And I'll tell you what I did most of the time I was there: nothing.

Have you tried doing nothing? It's something. It's good. I had one day where I went out and set up this tent on the beach, which by the way, that is a whole anger management kind of like exercise. If you've ever tried to set up a tent you've never set up before on a windy beach early in the morning by yourself—luckily, I have family members who looked out the window and saw the circus and went, "You better go down and help your dad," and things worked out. But that day, I just sat there on the—I just sat there. Just sat there and just watched the waves, see the water coming in, closed my eyes. I could hear it as it just came in and watching this water roll in. I spent the whole day. I went inside, got something to eat, came back out, just—just more of that. That was my day. It's a pretty awesome day, I'm going to tell you, sitting on a public beach just watching waves come in.

And then towards the end of the day, I was staring at the waves and I was like, "How's that work?" Like, have you ever thought about like, how do waves work? Because I mean, like, part of me says, "Okay, the water comes in," but you know that's not the end of the story because otherwise we'd all be in a flood plain, right? I mean, the water comes in, then it must like go away. So, like, okay. And I'm just sitting there in my little chair having my zen moment of philosophical and physics, you know, and I'm like, "So, I mean, I know that when I'm standing out there, I can feel water rushing back. So, is it just like it keeps washing in and washing back?" I'm like, "By how far does that cycle like what—what's going on there?"

So, I spent my evening googling and doing a lot of research—this is why I don't do my vacation, but I can't help it, I couldn't let go of it: "How's that work?" And I found out it doesn't work anything like what I thought. Did you know that in the ocean with the waves that the water isn't really coming in? That like, if you look at your worship handout, that diagram that has like the little arrows, that's the way the waters in any given spot in the water, the water is just doing this loop up and down. And it's the energy passing through is what you see as a wave. But really the water is just doing this. So it's not getting—say this is the beach—it's not coming in like this. It's just doing this. And then the energy moves to this set of water that's doing this and then this. And when this water hits the sand of the beach,

it slows it down. It slows down the water that's going up and down and it makes the water trip over itself. And that's what you and I see as a wave.

Now, some of you are thinking, "Uh, duh. It's called grade school science class, Rob." But I'm telling you, I grew up here in Belleville in the Midwest. They didn't teach us about waves because they probably thought you'll never see it anyway. We learned about rivers and lakes and creeks, but we didn't learn about waves and oceans. But there's a lot happening. I just realized there's so much happening out there that is not the way I thought it—the way it worked.

Faith Like a Wave

And with today's passage, there is so much going on in this that shows you that God and faith doesn't exactly work the way you might think. And it certainly didn't work the way those Israelites thought it was going to work. And I'm look, I'm with you, Julia, this is a tough book of the Bible. There's a lot of stuff in here. Wait till next week, it gets a little crazier. But this week we're in the book of Judges. It's—it's sometimes hard to get through, but this one is packed. This passage is packed with at least three spots that show you how God and faith works very different than what you might expect and certainly different from what they expected.

It starts off with this problem in that the faith is not passing along to the next generation. And the Israelites just thought, "Look, we're good church folk." Actually, they would say, "We're good synagogue folk." All right? And so, you know, we have our kids in the midst. It's just going to pass along. It'll just pass along—that—that it'll just move. But faith doesn't pass like that. Faith kind of works like a wave. It—the faith stays there. It's the energy of that faith that gets transferred to the next generation as it goes through its life and the next generation is going. It's the energy of the stories that we tell. And it says, if you read back earlier in this chapter, they stopped telling the stories. They stopped emphasizing the importance of—of worship and of—of learning about God. And they let their kids just wander off into the practices of the common world around them, which involved, yes, worshiping other gods.

And we sometimes get caught up and we think that like faith is just going to pass along automatically. But the truth is it only passes along if we pass along that energy through our telling of the stories, through our encouragement. Every single one of you parents and grandparents and guardians out there that are part of an encouragement for your young people to be part of whether it's Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights—you are contributing to that. That is a passive energy. Even when you're not successful at getting your kid here, it's still an energy that is felt and received. And when they come here, they

run into jokers like these people. And you hear these stories of faith and these experiences and that's how it's transferred through that energy that comes through all of us. Faith doesn't just—faith is a work of the entire ocean of us, not just the youth room downstairs.

The Barriers and Obstacles We Face

Another thing that's a little bit different than what you might expect is that in this story it says God didn't remove the barriers. God let the Canaanites stay there—the ones who were pulling them away into other beliefs and practices. God didn't clear the path for them. God provided judges and helps in the midst of it. But the idea that like, "Well, if God's really active, then God's just going to clear the path for us," I don't know if you've experienced life, but it doesn't quite work that way. In fact, it's often those barriers, those obstacles, those challenges that become the very arena where God does the greatest amount of faith formation in our lives.

Those of you right now, when you think about a time in your life when you had a major movement of your faith, I'll bet there was some type of barrier, hiccup, speed bump, challenge that was around that period as well. That our God uses these moments rather than simply clearing the path always. And that is frustrating. That hurts. And when you're going through something really tragic, that doesn't bring comfort. But what it does tell us is that when those moments come, that God is still with us even when it feels hard and tough and painful.

God could be calling you right now. You got to be ready for it. You should answer it right away. And someone did. Thanks be to God.

I did so much driving on this trip. Do you know how much Jimmy John's I ate? Do you know why I eat Jimmy John's? Because I want to pretend I'm eating healthy when I'm on vacation. It's not. But I love me some Jimmy John's. But I found—did you know how much wisdom is on the walls of a Jimmy John's? I didn't realize this till I was stuck in a long line at a bathroom to a Jimmy John's and I looked up on the wall and there was—I thought, "Wow." And I read this and I thought, "Wow, that's a lot of wisdom for Jimmy John's." You know, turns out it's a quote from Randy Pausch's book, *The Last Lecture*. But I had a moment where I really thought to myself, "Wow, Jimmy John's really stepped up their philosophical game." Because what it said on this sign was it said, "Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you want."

Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you want. The idea that—that when—when we reach those—those—those barriers, those challenges, when things don't go as we want, there's an opportunity for an experience. And maybe it's an experience you could do without, but it's an experience where something that was broken can maybe be made

stronger, where something that was lacking can be filled up, where there's maybe something in you that needs to grow and change and it creates the opportunity for that.

Building on God Alone

But it depends—that resiliency of faith, too, that depends upon you resting your faith not on a single person, program, or event, but on God alone. The mistake that we can make sometimes in our church life is that we will rest our faith on a single—even a single person, on a pastor. Look, I don't want that kind of pressure from you people, like, I do one thing wrong and then you're going to give up on God. You can't do that to me and you certainly don't want to do that to yourself. Pastor Alex doesn't want that pressure either. I can tell you that right now.

The idea like, "Well, there's this one pastor who did this one thing and so now that's it. I'm not going to church anymore. I give up on worshiping the Lord God Almighty who loves you and sacrificed for you and—and—and provides so many blessings because one dodo is a bad pastor." And don't get me wrong, if you've gone through this experience, this isn't a shame for you. This is just an encouragement to say: don't you dare let that one dodo mess up your faith, because some of us are dodos. Don't let us mess it up. Don't let some one—oh, they took away that one class or that one Bible study or that one program, "Now I'm done." Don't do that. Don't let one class mess up your faith. This is encouragement. This isn't shame. Hear me saying it again to you: the resilience you have is that it will not depend upon one of us pastor dodos, one of those programs, blah blah blah, one of those classes, one of those weird, rude people who hit you the wrong way with their comment out in the lobby or whatever. I mean, like, don't let that be what you build your faith upon.

If—if you build your faith that way, it's like the sandcastles I'd see the kids building in front of me on the beach, because guess what? Wave number five and that sucker's gone. Or just wait till the next morning because they clear that beach every night. You want an example of resilience? Here's what I saw when I looked out on those waves. Do you know what I saw out there? Seagulls. Seagulls riding the waves. And—and do you know how many seagulls get grabbed by the big waves and come crashing in on the beach? None. Zippy. Not a single one of them are overtaken by those waves, because they rest upon the water itself and they go up and down with the waves. And when we rely on God and our faith as the core of what we're building in our spiritual lives, then we can ride those waves that come in our lives and we won't come crashing down and we won't get washed away. It's too precious of a gift to let it roar any other way.

Grace That Meets Us

The third way there's something really unusual and different about this passage is that what we imagine is we want to hear a story where it's like the people messed up, they said, "We're sorry, God," and God like, "All right, I forgive you. Here's another judge to help you." And then they mess up and they go, "I'm sorry," and then God goes, "Okay," and then gives them grace. It doesn't work that way. If you listen to it, God—they didn't repent. They didn't. There was no repentance in this story. God saw their suffering and said, "I hear their groaning and so I will send a judge. I will send help to them." Do you know how low on the spiritual ladder groaning is? You know, many of you are very good at that spiritual practice. And God can just use your groaning. And God chooses to use groaning to respond with grace.

We get an idea that—that grace is like a transaction. You have to come forward and go, "I'm really, really sorry, God. I'm really, really sorry." And then and only then will the Lord God Almighty go, "All right, grace." When the truth is—is that grace is on its way to meet you long before you ever turned around. Long before you ever repented. Long before you ever had the thought of sorry. Grace was worked so far out at sea to come and meet you right where you are. And that's what's so amazing about grace. It doesn't depend upon how great you are. It doesn't depend upon how magnificent you've been in your faith journey. It comes and it meets you. And the scriptures teach us this over and over again. If we go to Romans, we hear: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." It doesn't say we all repented and then Christ came and took care of stuff. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

It tells us in the Gospel of Luke, there's a story of the prodigal son. Some of you know this story about a son who gets the father's inheritance, goes off and wastes it, comes back with the plan of repenting, of saying, "I'm sorry. Just make me a servant." Comes back. But before that son can come back, the father rushes out at seeing him approaching and celebrates his arrival and doesn't even give that son the chance to say that they're repenting and make him one of the—make me one of your hired hands. The response of grace in that story is a story to teach us: this is the way God sees us. The minute we turn back home, God is running towards us with grace. That's what's amazing about grace. If you could earn it, it wouldn't be so hot.

So, Judges is a lot to deal with, but in this one passage, there's these three beautiful expressions of just how amazing this faith and relationship with God is—that it's something that gets transmitted from one to another, that we get to participate in that; that there's a resilience that's meant for us, not based on whether or not there's any Canaanites around or you had some pastor dodo, but resilient because of the faithfulness of God and our willingness to lean on that; and that grace is something that's ready to meet you.

Wherever you are, however broken you might feel, this sounds like good news. I'm glad I don't understand it so well, because every time I think I do, I come up with something less. So, I got a lot to learn about waves, and I got—well, I got a lot to learn about Jimmy John's, too, to be honest, but we won't get into that. And we all got a lot to learn about God's grace. But at the very least, let's learn today that we can trust it.

To God be the glory.

Hallelujah and amen.