

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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**WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO
2 Chronicles 20:1-13**

I don't envy President Obama. It is an understatement to say he doesn't have an easy job. I think it must be far more difficult and far more complicated than anyone aspiring to be president can imagine. I don't envy the President's domestic, foreign policy, or military advisers. Nor do I envy any of our elected leaders in Washington. The problems and challenges the President and all our leaders face, and the responsibilities they are asked to shoulder, are enormous. And, it seems, the legislative, political, and military actions they take always have unintended consequences.

Nor do I envy the leaders of other nations, such as British Prime Minister David Cameron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, or Petro Poroshenko, the President of Ukraine. I don't envy any of them.

On the eve of 9/11 this past week, President Obama gave a speech about our response to the threat posed by the Islamist terror group ISIS. The question of what to do about ISIS and its campaign to establish a radical Islamist state bent on either converting or killing everyone everywhere who does not embrace their religion and culture, is not an easy one to answer. It may be possible to degrade, defeat, and even destroy ISIS as an organization. To win hearts, to change hearts, and to effect lasting change in the prevailing cultures of the peoples of Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and other countries where violence and repression are sanctioned by the coercive power of Islam, is a task so daunting as to be humanly impossible. I believe it is *humanly impossible* – beyond the power or ability of the United States of America, or the U. S. and our allies to accomplish, no matter how noble our aims and how firm our resolve.

In addition, there is the question of how to attain a lasting peace between Israel and Hamas, the terrorist group whose goal is the elimination of Israel as a nation-state. There is also the question of what to do about Russian President Vladimir Putin's desire to annex a portion – perhaps all – of Ukraine and bring it under direct Russian rule. There is no “easy button” for resolving these international problems.

Nor, here at home, is the question of what to do about the epidemic of domestic violence in our society easy to answer. It has been thrust into our consciousness by the revelation last week of a security video showing former NFL player Ray Rice punching – and knocking out – his then-fiancee (now wife) in an Atlantic City casino hotel elevator several months ago. The reaction against Rice was swift and strong. But the NFL has come under severe criticism for failing to take the problem of domestic abuse more seriously and to combat it more vigorously. How to reduce the number of instances, or to eliminate it completely, remains a problem not only for the NFL but for our society as a whole. And there is no immediate societal or political solution.

Which brings us to Judah's King Jehoshaphat and the passage of Scripture we read in 2 Chronicles 20. Jehoshaphat was the fourth king of Judah following the break-up of the united kingdom of Israel that occurred after the death of Solomon. Succeeding his father Asa, Jehoshaphat reigned as king of Judah from 872-848 BC. Listen to what is said about him in 2 Chronicles 17:

“The LORD was with Jehoshaphat because in his early years he walked in the ways his father David had followed. He did not consult the Baals but sought the God of his father and followed His commands rather than the [sinful] practices of Israel. The LORD established the kingdom under his control. His heart was devoted to the ways of the LORD” (2 Chronicles 17:3-6).

Devoted to the Lord. Would to God that it could always be said of us that our hearts *were* and *are* devoted – *fully devoted* – to the Lord and His ways!

Like his father Asa before him, Jehoshaphat was one of the good kings of Judah. He was a godly king who sought to follow God. Yet, like his father, he made some serious mistakes, and was rebuked and chastised by God on more than one occasion for entering into unwise alliances with Israel's King Ahab and later Ahab's son Ahaziah. He arranged for his son Jehoram to marry Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel (18:1), a marriage that proved disastrous for Judah as a nation, opening the door for Athaliah to spread the poisonous pagan influence of her mother to Judah, causing the nation to turn away from God to the worship of Baal.

In addition, Jehoshaphat joined King Ahab in a disastrous military campaign against the Arameans at Ramoth Gilead that resulted in the death of Ahab and nearly resulted in Jehoshaphat's death as well. Even though a prophet of the Lord named Micaiah warned against attacking Ramoth Gilead, Jehoshaphat, perhaps feeling strong political pressure from Ahab, agreed to take part in the doomed attack (18:1-19:3).

Later still, Jehoshaphat joined Ahaziah, the son of Ahab and Jezebel, in a venture to build a fleet of trading ships, a partnership opposed by God, who caused the entire fleet to be destroyed (20:35-37).

But in the verses we read, we see that Jehoshaphat, despite his shortcomings and errors in judgment, learned a critically important life-lesson that we can apply to our lives today, even if our particular circumstances are far different from his. Here is the situation in 2 Chronicles: "A vast army" (20:2) of Moabites and Ammonites from east of the Dead Sea, a force with overwhelmingly superior numbers, was advancing toward Judah. Jehoshaphat knew his army was not equipped to defend the nation against the invading army. Outnumbered and overmatched by the advancing force, Jehoshaphat felt completely overwhelmed. And, as he freely admitted, he didn't know what to do.

What do you do in a situation like that? What can you do, what should you do, when you don't know what to do? Jehoshaphat is not the only person who has ever been in a position like this. If you're like me, there are plenty of times when you don't know what to do. And, though it seems anathema to admit it, I bet there are plenty of times when the president and his top civilian and military advisers really don't know what to do.

There are at least five options open to us when we don't know what to do:

1. IGNORE THE PROBLEM.

First, we can ignore the situation. We can make like an ostrich and stick our heads in the sand. We can try to sweep the problem under the rug and pretend it doesn't exist. We can close our eyes and hope the problem or crisis goes away. We can live in denial.

Jehoshaphat knew that denial would not protect him and the people of Judah from the invading army. To pretend the threat did not exist would only make things worse. History is full of examples to illustrate this.

To deny threats to our national security, to deny that we have a domestic abuse problem, to deny that racism is still alive, to deny the pervasiveness of pornography, or the existence of sex-slavery in our culture, will not make any of them disappear. To ignore signs of trouble in any area of life in the hope that the trouble will go away only hastens the inevitable.

2. MINIMIZE THE SITUATION.

A second option is to minimize the situation, which is to say, in effect: “It really couldn’t be all that bad.” It is not the same as denial, but the two are a lot alike. It is certainly possible to blow things out of proportion and

make a mountain out of a molehill. Some people do this. Some people do it a lot. But we must guard against the opposite danger. If we treat Everest-sized problems as if they are just little bumps in the road, we’re going to be in big trouble. It would not have worked for Jehoshaphat, and it will not work for us. It will not work for our nation and its allies. Nor will it work for us in our personal lives and relationships.

Thinking something – an adversary, a problem, a challenge – to be minor or insignificant doesn’t make it so. When we underestimate the size or nature of the threat or overestimate our own resources, we make ourselves even more vulnerable to trouble. To his credit, Jehoshaphat did not do that.

3. KEEP DOING WHAT YOU’RE ALREADY DOING.

A third option, when you’re faced with a perplexing or difficult situation, is to just keep doing what you’ve been doing, regardless of whether or not it is effective.

When the way we’ve always done it doesn’t work anymore, when our most earnest efforts fail to produce the results we hope for, what can we do? We can keep doing the same thing, only more of it. That is, we can spend more money, pass more laws, and have more programs. But it doesn’t mean things will get any better.

This relates directly to the church and the mission God has given us as His people. We must never change our message. We must stay true to the message of the gospel. We must not set aside the Bible and its authority in our lives. But we can and must be open to changing our methods in order to more effectively share the saving love of Christ with our neighbors, to make Christ known, and to make disciples who are rooted and built up in Him (Colossians 2:7). The message is unchanging. But our methods can and must change. Continuing to do things the way we’ve always done them because it is the way we’ve always done it is not the answer.

You probably know that one definition of insanity is to keep on doing the same things while hoping for different results.

When you come to the end of your rope, the solution is not to go looking for more rope. The solution is to take God’s hand. Jehoshaphat understood this.

4. PANIC.

A fourth option, when you don’t know what to do, is to panic and succumb to “the sky is falling!” syndrome. When you minimize, you put yourself and/or others at risk by underestimating the magnitude of the problem. At the other end of the spectrum is the person who exaggerates or magnifies the situation all out of proportion.

Remember Chicken Little? Chicken Little’s panic infected all the other animals, making them sitting ducks for Foxy Loxy as he led all the frightened animals to his den. Our anxiety and fear – which betray our lack of trust in God – may be as formidable as any adversary we face.

When you think the world is falling apart and the end is at hand, Jesus says to keep your head. Don’t panic. But remember who’s in charge. (See what Jesus says about this in Matthew 24:1-35.)

To his credit, Jehoshaphat did just that. When faced with the choice of either panic or prayer, like the nun I told you about last Sunday, Jehoshaphat didn’t panic. Nor did he forget who is really in charge.

5. PRAY.

What can you do when you don't know what to do? You can do exactly what King Jehoshaphat did. He called for a national day of prayer and fasting (2 Chronicles 20:3). He turned to God in prayer, and he didn't seem to be embarrassed about it at all. He admitted that he didn't know what to do. But he knew where to turn. He

knew the One who is able, more than able, to handle his every concern, from the smallest to the biggest. He knew the One who is able, more than able, to handle anything that could possibly come his way – including the invasion of a massive army. Jehoshaphat knew that God is able when we are not.

So he did the only thing that made sense under the circumstances. He prayed. He admitted his helplessness and cried out to God for help. Notice his confession in verse 12: “We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You.”

This, I think, is a beautiful statement of faith. It is saturated with humility and total dependence on God. Biblical faith is not wishful thinking. There is more to it than positive thinking. It is not naïve, blind optimism. It is not believing the unbelievable. It is believing God. It is a settled confidence in God and the trustworthiness of His word to us. It is the exercise of hope rooted in our knowledge of God and His ways, His will, and His promises.

When faced with a situation in which we don't know what to do, we *do* know where to turn. Taking it to the Lord in prayer can help to calm your troubled heart and to put things back into perspective. You don't have to wait until you're facing a major crisis to do it. There is no problem in your life too big or too small to take to the Lord in prayer.

What should you do when you don't know what to do? Do what Jehoshaphat did. Admit that you don't know what to do. Admit that you are powerless to handle the situation on your own. Take your need to God in prayer. Enlist others to join you in prayer and maybe even fasting. Ask others to join you in the serious business of prayer.

As Jehoshaphat knew, there is never a time when it is not time to pray. Especially when you're in over your head and you don't know what to do.

Amy Grant wrote a song that goes like this:

Where do I go when I need a shelter?
Where do I go when I need a friend?
Where do I go when I need some helping?
Where do I go?
Back on my knees again.

This is not, as some people believe, a sign of weakness. It is a sign of wisdom. When Jehoshaphat went to prayer and called the people of Judah to pray with him, it was not something to be embarrassed about. It was his finest hour.

He had confidence to pray because he knew that God is sovereign, that “power and might are in (God's) hand, and no one can withstand (Him)” (20:6). This same confidence in God's sovereign power should encourage and inspire us to call on Him today.

Jehoshaphat had confidence to pray also because he remembered what God had done in the past. He remembered the promises God had made to His people. And he knew that God always keeps His promises. (See 20:7-11). This same confidence should drive us to pray in faith.

Jehoshaphat had confidence to pray as well because he believed God could deliver His people, even in the most trying and most threatening circumstances. He knew that God can make a way where there seems to be no way.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN JEHOSHAPHAT PRAYED

Do you know what happened when Jehoshaphat led the people of Judah in prayer? Here is what Scripture says:

- God gave an answer through a prophet named Jahaziel, who told Jehoshaphat and the people not to give up hope and not to be discouraged or afraid. The prophet declared that the battle was not theirs but God's, and assured them that the Lord would be with them (20:14-17).
- The people responded to this message with heartfelt worship and praise to God (20:18-19) – which is how we should always respond to God and His gracious word to us.
- His own faith having been strengthened, Jehoshaphat then urged all the people to put their faith in God and in the certainty of His word (20:20)
- Then God Himself sprang into action, causing the enemies of Judah to turn on one another and destroy one another, so that, by the sovereign hand of God, Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah were delivered without even going to battle (20:22-30). It was, without a doubt, a God-thing.

Does God always work in such a dramatic or miraculous way in every situation, in every crisis, in every trial or need? No. But He does promise to be “near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth” (Psalm 145:18).

This promise is not just for Jehoshaphat. It is for us. For you and me. For *all* who call on Him with sincere hearts.

Not only does the Lord promise to be near. He promises to be with us. He promises His presence. He says: “I will be with you” (2 Chronicles 20:17). He promises never to leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). And He promises us His grace (2 Corinthians 12:9). Grace sufficient for every situation, every need, every challenge or hardship we will ever face. Grace sufficient to see us through.

When you don't know what to do, when you don't know what the church should do, when you don't know what our nation and its leaders should do, when you don't know what the community of nations should do, what is the best thing to do?

- Admit it to God, as Jehoshaphat did. Say: “We don't know what to do, but our eyes are upon You (2 Chronicles 20:12).
- Take it to the Lord in prayer. Make prayer your first resort, not your last.
- Ask others to join with you in prayer.
- Trust in the Lord with all your heart (Proverbs 3:5), and walk with Him in faith.
- Give God the glory and praise He deserves (Psalm 96:8).

Lord, let it be so in us, in Your church, and in our nation, now and always. Amen.