

AND WHAT OF FAITH?

Text: Genesis: 15:1-6, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, St. Luke 12:32-40

When I was a little child, like most young children, and no doubt most of you, I was afraid of the dark. Great monsters lurked under my bed and in my closet waiting to drag me into some nether world and devour me. Every creak in our old house was a sign to me that they were creeping closer to my bed, and any minute a furry claw would reach up and drag me to my doom.

I outgrew those fears by the time I was in my twenties but during those happy years of my youth, I would always make sure that I got to bed ahead of my mom and dad because as long as I heard them downstairs chatting or watching TV, I knew they were on guard, ready to defend me against the denizens seeking my body and soul.

It was for me the earliest recollection of faith, which was the confidence I had in my mom and dad that no matter what, they would always be there for me and protect me. The faith of a child is an amazing thing-they will jump into your arms in a pool in a great leap, knowing you will catch them. They will enter strange and foreboding places, like the mall, surrounded by hundreds of people and cling to you lest they get lost. When they are hurt or in pain, they will come running calling your name and seek comfort.

Yet something happens as a child grows. They begin to venture out; they develop courage and confidence and get adventurous. AND, they stop listening to your advice. “Little Johnny-don’t touch that it’s hot.” Then the inevitable “OUCH, Mommy!” To which a compassionate mother would always say “I told you not to touch that. Obviously you take after your father.”

The older they get, well, it doesn’t get any better. “Why can’t I stay out past 10PM, Mary’s mother let’s her do it?” That simple childlike faith, that confidence in us as parents, all seems to disappear.

When I had kids who were younger, my parents would snicker and smile at me when they saw me in some drama with them. My mom in her sweet little voice would pronounce that this was their vindication and God’s revenge.

I have often pondered the verse from Matthew 19 regarding the little children who sought to come to Jesus. Or Lord told His disciples “Let the little children come unto me, and hinder them not, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

It is perhaps one of the most profound verses in scripture with a concise and direct message, “for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

God well understands the nature of a child, all trusting, confident in his parent’s love, unquestioning-strong enough that any fear or trepidation a child may have, that when that child turns to his or her parent, it is with full trust that the parent will be there for them.

But as we get older and focus more on ourselves, and less on our parents, we redirect that confidence on us, thinking we are the masters of our destiny and have total control over our lives, often forgetting our parents and worse, forgetting God.

In our Old Testament lesson, God says to Abraham “Do not be afraid, I am your shield, your very great reward.”

But Abraham questions God-thinking of his legacy, of what he will pass on. Abraham says to God “What can you give me, I am childless”. He is focused on his fortune, his wealth, his life and what he will leave behind. But God asks him to look beyond earth, to the heavens themselves and says to him “Look up to the heavens and count the stars...so shall your offspring be”.

And Abraham starts to get it. He doesn't quite see it yet, he doesn't understand what God has in store for him but he begins to come around, to understand that although he may never see the full extent of the plan God has for him, a man with no heir, will be the father of millions!

The author of the letter to the Hebrews clearly defines faith for us. “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Like the child that hides under the blanket knowing it will protect him from the monsters afoot, it is our hope that the dawn will come in Christ Jesus and that the trials, tribulations and torment in our earthly life will pass as we go to that which our Lord has promised us.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to speak further of Abraham and his generation. “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.” So here they were, with full expectation of what was to come, and even though they did not see it touch their lives on earth, they had confidence in God that He would fulfill his promise to them.

Death is always with us. All of us know someone who has died recently, or sometimes several. Some of these deaths are natural, coming after a long fulfilled life. Others are tragic, through some horrific accident or early onset of disease. For us, death is always a time of great sorrow and I always reflect on why in each circumstance that confronts me. It is the emptiness of the lives of those left behind, the expectations of a life not fulfilled, the trial of the passing itself, by illness, accident or some other sad cause. But our sorrow is often compounded by the question we are forced to ask ourselves when we see death “Is everything we believe about the salvation of Jesus Christ, the promise of eternal life and the resurrection really true?”

A friend from my last congregation said to me just before her beloved husband died that she could not imagine how people who have no faith get through these things. How can some face death with some courage-perhaps because like that little child, with all the fear, they choose to place their trust in God and leap into His arms?

When my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer I asked her what her greatest fear was- she told me, “I am not afraid to die because I know I will be in the loving hands of my Lord, I am afraid of getting there but I know He will be with me through that as well.”

That is what the faith of a little child really means. “The kingdom belongs to such as these.” In our Gospel this morning our Lord tells us not to be afraid for our Father “has been pleased to give us the kingdom.” He says, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, your heart will be also.”

The Lord’s message is to look to the joys that await us in our life with Him in heaven, and to not to be so wrapped up in the tribulations that face us here on earth. To look beyond as God said to Abraham, to have faith that draws us closer to Him in our lives here. Faith that is sure of what we hope for and are certain of, even though we do not see it. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we believe it with all our hearts.

Such faith gives us confidence in the gift of salvation from our Lord, that although we are unworthy and deserve nothing but death and punishment, He loves us, takes us back, holds us in His loving hands, comforts us in our grief, lifts us in our despair, strengthens us in our facing death, takes us to Him in our passing. It is the faith that clings to our justification in Christ and gratitude for our salvation which inspires us to express our faith through witness and good works, and gives us hope in all we face.

So, how often do we ask the question of ourselves “Is my faith strong enough?” Do we ask the question when we see someone standing strong in their beliefs “Why can’t my faith be as strong as theirs?” How often does doubt cloud our minds and our hearts?

I spend a great deal of time studying theology. The evolution of the Christian Church and comparative theology are my favorite areas of concentration. It is often not very inspiring in that the history of Christianity is one of conflict, division and turmoil. Yet when I turn to scripture, when I open the pages of my bible and read our Lord’s words, read what Paul and the Apostles have said, read of the promises our Lord has given us, it brings me peace in my heart, it inspires me to do better, to lift my hands in service and in praise, to let that light shine, to fight against my desire to sin, to be closer with our Lord. It is a daily struggle as I ask myself those same questions, “Is my faith strong enough, good enough, acceptable to God? Would I be able to accept in faith the trials that so many around me go through? If my faith is tested, will I fail? How do I rid myself of these doubts that nag at me and separate me from God?”

Scripture is God’s gift to us, our guide, and our refuge. Its words are effective and they open our eyes to God through the power of the Holy Spirit. They assure us of salvation for all who believe. Scripture gives us confidence in our Lord through the strengthening of faith. It helps us to understand that we cannot go it alone, that God is there for us.

Books stores are filled with self-help texts. There is no shortage of experts who stand ready to take our dollars because of their claim that they have the answers. Yet for 2,000 years, these words have endured and given hope to generations. “Do not be afraid little flock, for your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

In St. Luke’s Gospel, the Lord does go on to give us a warning for our lives-“Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks, they can immediately open the door for him.”

The well known reformer Dr. Martin Luther often said that we are closest to God when we are deepest in despair. That is because we find ourselves at the point where we cannot do anything for ourselves or are no longer in control of our own lives. We are no longer able to handle what has been placed upon us. Like that child who chooses to leave the safety of a mothers arms and wander off, it is not until he or she is lost that the fear and terror of being alone strikes and they turn back in desperation looking for the safety of those arms again.

It is the sinful nature of our being to wander off. To sin when we know it’s when we know we are sinning. To allow what defames and hurts others to flow from our mouths, to judge, to condemn, to sit idle when the Lord’s work needs to be done, to be frugal in our time-talents and resources in spreading the Gospel. To hold back when we are able to witness to the glory of our God because of what others may think of us. This is why we question our faith-because we know our human nature is separating us from God.

God understands us-we are His creation, so He gives us the means to find our way back through His word, our church, Holy Communion and the everlasting gift of the Holy Spirit imparted to us in our baptism.

The message here is clear for us, Christ and His word are to be our primary focus every day. Not when we get around to it. Not when we have time, not when things are bad but when things are good and we are busiest and there is no room in our lives for anything else. It is then we must, with God’s help, push out everything that separates us from God. Turning to God’s word, the Holy Spirit work in us and our faith will grow.

“You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him.”

Sometimes our tribulations are long and arduous. Sometimes they are as fast as a heart beat, which is often all that separates us from the transition from life on this earth to what is beyond. Which of us knows the hour when we will be called, when the storm will hit, when we will face our Lord. We are called to be ready and the time for our faith to grow is now, this instant, this moment in time for we do not know when He will come for us.

Finally there is a message in St. Luke’s Gospel for the church, its ministers and each of us who count ourselves among the faithful. “But understand this: if the owner of the

house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would have not let his house be broken into.”

The strength of our convictions as Christians should not falter, the secularization of God’s Holy Church should not be tolerated, the witness of our faith should be clear and evident to all who we touch, the caring for each other must be unceasing, and the task of spreading the Gospel must be paramount in all that we do.

The thief seeks to break in, tear down our faith, and separate us from our Lord. The wants and desires of man and his sinful nature surround us and seek to tear us away from our God. Like the predator who stalks the wandering child, evil stands ready to crush our faith and drag us to damnation.

St. Paul tells us “I am convinced that neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In the warmth and glow of that love, God calls us to have unquestioning, all surrendering, and confident faith built upon Scripture and strengthened by the Sacraments. We are encouraged and enabled to share that faith we those who have doubts and those who are afraid. We are inspired to be witnesses of our faith through the works of our hands. We are called to replace the fears of our lives with the confidence of God’s love for us and thereby the gift of faith will grow and burn brightly.

Not later, not when we have time, not when things are bad-but right now, this instant, this moment in time “for the Son of Man will come at an hour when we do not expect Him.” It is that faith that strengthens us in time of weakness, upholds us in time of trial, comforts us in time of pain and it is the faith that as we face death, causes us to proclaim “The Lord Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, He has risen indeed alleluia!

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A prayer for faith: “Heavenly Father, our faith is often weak, we doubt, we worry, and we lack confidence in your love for us. Yet your love for us is unfailing, you are there when we wander and take us back when we fail. Lord, let your love shine in each of us and may our faith grow though the power of the Holy spirit, though our commitment to scripture and the nourishment of Holy Communion. May our faith shine though our witness and actions in our everyday lives, in helping others, in doing only those things that glorify you. And when we falter, open your arms to us and guide us back, so that we may rest in the warmth of your love and compassion for us. In Jesus Name we pray- AMEN.”