

Sunday, August 18, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

***What Do You Expect?***

**INTRODUCTION** *(written & delivered by liturgist Allene Kussin)*

What actually IS capital 'F' Faith? What does it look like in practice? Those questions are ones most people will ask at some point in their lives, especially when told to 'just have faith' -- but in what? Or Whom?

Specific expectations are often extended in the charge to 'have faith' -- expectations to have the outcome of the situation be as one wishes, or to be 'rid', 'freed' of the particular bent of their serious doubt. These questions around faith are the questions the writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews attempts to answer, especially as the ones written to are charged with considering the work of God in the midst of all of life.

The author of this letter is unknown. What *is* known is that it was written before the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD and the intended recipients were Jews who had become Christians. Both the writer of Hebrews and the readers of this letter were certainly people who would have been quite familiar with the stories referenced in this passage. These were their sacred tribal stories. And also, they have become our stories as well.

But back to the questions around Faith: What within our life *challenges* that which we have come to place our faith in? What expectations do we carry into our time of quandary or uncertainty? Perhaps these words written so long ago will find relevance to your life as you seek an authentic faith response, no matter the outcome.

**Hebrews 11:29 - 12:3** (The Message (MSG) translation)

By an act of faith, Israel walked through the Red Sea on dry ground. The Egyptians tried it and drowned. By faith, the Israelites marched around the walls of Jericho for seven days, and the walls fell flat. By an act of faith, Rahab, the Jericho harlot, welcomed the spies and escaped the destruction that came on those who refused to trust God.

I could go on and on, but I've run out of time. There are so many more— Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets ... Through acts of faith, they toppled kingdoms, made justice work, took the promises for

themselves. They were protected from lions, fires, and sword thrusts, turned disadvantage to advantage, won battles, routed alien armies. Women received their loved ones back from the dead. There were those who, under torture, refused to give in and go free, preferring something better: resurrection. Others braved abuse and whips, and, yes, chains and dungeons. We have stories of those who were stoned, sawed in two, murdered in cold blood; stories of vagrants wandering the earth in animal skins, homeless, friendless, powerless—the world didn't deserve them! —making their way as best they could on the cruel edges of the world.

Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours.

Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's *there*, in the place of honor, right alongside God.

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Prayer:

*Thank you, God for giving us stories. Thank you for their enduring power to guide us, to point us toward the truth of your loving-kindness and faithfulness. And as we live into our story, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen*

Did you ever wonder why human beings were created in the first place? The simplest and most profound answer I've ever heard is that God created humanity because God loves stories! And, we do too. I loved hearing my grandfather tell stories of hunting and fishing in the wilderness of Maine. I love listening to *The Moth Story Hour* on NPR where regular people stand on stage live, with no script and tell a true story from their life. A few years ago, we had hosted a powerful evening of storytelling, here at TriCon, we called, "Stories of Coming Out". We heard first person accounts of what it was like to come out to family and friends to claim your sexual identity.

Stories have the power to transform us. Whenever I wonder why someone is behaving the way they are, I ask them to tell me their story, and once I hear it, I find I have better understanding and more compassion. Through stories, we share passions, fears, sadness, hardships and joys and we discover common ground with other people. Through stories we connect with other people.

In the confirmation program we have a session on the Bible. I ask the students what stories do they remember from the Bible. I then say that the Bible isn't a book as much as it is a library, filled with stories that tell us about God's relationship with humanity. It's a love story repeated over and over again. In the beginning, it is good. The story begins in our flow with God's perfection. Soon, we wander away, get ourselves in trouble and at the steely edge of the dark, cold abyss we are rescued by God's grace. Over and over again, it's really the same story played out on a different stage. We reject God, get in trouble and God comes to our rescue.

The writer of Hebrews knew the power of story. He drew out all the great ones to remind us that faith in God consistently works. But, beyond that, we are reminded that the outcome of faith is generally quite different than what you might think. Sometimes Goliath is defeated and sometimes you end up homeless, friendless and powerless!

So, what are we to make of this vast paradox? What is the point if we don't get what we want and why is it that some people, less faithful than us, do? It's a fair question. I think we have to begin with the question Allene asked, "What actually IS capital 'F' Faith? What does it look like in practice?" (Thanks for that Allie!)

I knew a guy years ago who subscribed to a theology he called, "name it and claim it." He cited Scriptures with great authority and conviction, "*It is written that with God all things are possible - ask and it shall be given to you - if you ask for a piece of bread will your father give you a stone instead?*" He truly believed that if you somehow mustered up enough faith, named the outcome you desired and claimed it so, then God would come through. His idea of God was like having a Genie in a bottle that could be summoned up and counted on to grant your wish! It is similar to the new age metaphysical idea that we can create reality with our thoughts and intentions. Well, my friend, who was a lovely, sweet, sincere man, decided that he would "name it and claim it." He stopped wearing his glasses and claimed his severe nearsightedness to be healed! He named it and claimed it in faith. You know the rest of the story. For three days this poor man navigated the world legally blind before blaming his own lack of faith as the problem.

I think what Hebrews teaches is that outcomes are not what faith is about. We may think we know what God will do, or should do, but in fact we haven't a clue what's

ahead. Faith, I think, is more about trusting that whatever comes, whatever the specific outcome of your prayer is, God always comes to the rescue. It is trusting that God has knit together a greater plan, and in the end, God redeems all things.

The author of Hebrews chose characters and stories that dramatically point to faithful perseverance in the midst of difficulties. He wants to encourage us in the center of our own trials, pain and doubts, to trust. Faith, actually means *faithfulness*, trust and insight. Faith is more a verb than a noun. Faith is active and lived out rather than a simplistic belief that we conjure up. In the Hebrew text, faith can also be translated as substance, assurance, firmness, steadiness and pledge. When you think of faith as faithfulness, “confidence” and “assurance” you begin to see that faith is born from action and experience, not some wish-granting genie in a bottle or a prayer vending machine that dispenses your expectation when you have put enough in. It is the actions of faith that create the substance of faith. “I have no idea what’s ahead but I do think that my desire to please you, does in fact please you,” is how Thomas Merton put it. This kind of faith goes way beyond expectations. It is a faith that surrenders confidently to... whatever.

What do you expect? Surrender. It’s been said that expectations are resentments waiting to happen. When you have a faith that can trust that Love is at the helm guiding you into the safe port of redemption, no matter what storm you are facing or will face, you can endure.

Struggle, suffering, and loss are all part of this life journey. Jesus showed us that.

Faith has no easy answers. We can't buy it, conjure it up, or, like my vision challenged friend, fake it till we make it. Yet somehow it seems that our faith is inextricably bound to how much we trust in God’s faithfulness to us. That’s the plot point in all these Bible stories. In all of these stories, the players came to some epiphany, some crystalized realization in the moment of crisis; a kind of release into a ruthless trust that even if the worst happens, it will be all right. Even in our shame, guilt, sickness, heartache, and anger, God still loves us. Imagine!

Maybe the ingredients to a fully lived faith in God has to do more with how *we* behave more than how we think *God* should behave. Maybe when we love, forgive, trust, and release, we will know the sweet fruit of a living, active faith. It’s not about our faithfulness as much as it is about God’s faithfulness to us.

Toward the end of every confirmation program, the mentors and I always hear a sincere struggle facing many of the students. “I don’t think I can go through with this. I’m not sure I can believe everything I’m supposed to believe. I don’t want to

make a promise of faith I can't honestly keep." I always tell them that I understand and appreciate the honesty of their dilemma, but what is promised in confirmation is not that you will believe this forever. What is promised is that this story is one that we will wrestle with forever.

The scriptures are stories to wrestle with, stories to live in to. Our lives are part of a much bigger, interwoven, timeless Love story of rescue and redemption. Faith is simply to trust that God's story and ours are intimately connected, even when — especially when — we can't see those connections clearly.

What do you expect from God? What is the meaning of faith, and why would anyone believe in a benevolent, loving God? Because, if not, our own story becomes meaningless and temporal. It is vapor. To have faith in the larger, timeless story gives us purpose. Every act of mercy, forgiveness and benevolence that we faithfully extend contributes to the eternal story of God's presence among us.

So, let us continue on in our imperfection, our doubts, and our fears, trusting that in the end good will triumph over evil, love will conquer even death, and that we have contributed, because we try to follow in the Way of Jesus. Amen?