

July 7, 2022

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost

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When I was a child, on warm summer nights my Dad would take me outside into the back yard, toss down a blanket, and together we would lay there gazing up at the starry night sky. Overwhelmed by the vast array of heavenly bodies, my eyes would gradually adjust, just as my dad would point out by name, this star, or that one. For what seemed an eternity, we would lay in silent stillness, becoming one with God's creation. My family had experienced profound loss with the death of my younger brother, and each of us had to navigate our way forward in a world that was altered forever. Looking back, I can see that these moments not only brought me healing through time spent with my Dad, but that they also seeded within me a deep faith in God, and continuing awe and wonder for God's creation and my place in it.

But what is faith? In our letter to the Hebrews, the author speaks of faith. He attempts to articulate in word, and through story what faith is – this thing that can at moments seem so tangible and real, and at other moments, distant.

He begins eloquently with words that for many of us are familiar, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.” In these words, there are echoes of promise and belief; a sense of the present and of the future to come. They point to God's promises, our beliefs, and how those two intertwine in our lives.

How do we come to have faith? It may arise out of belief– a cognitive and conscious understanding of what we hold to be true. It may be something we inherited, passed on from generation to generation as integral to our religious life. We may come to know faith in times of difficulty, sensing our need for God, and finding God to be there. And, faith may also express itself as action – the action of choosing to trust in God's provision for us, and to put our hope in Jesus. The act of following God's lead, and trusting that it will take us where we need to be.

Like Abraham and Sarah, we too will die without seeing the fullness of all God's promises brought to fruition. Their example teaches us to how to live in the present moment, and to live hopefully for the future.

With all the saints who have come before us, we share the journey of believing in, following and trusting in an unseen God. It is a journey that at times is easy, and at others, a struggle, if not impossible. While God is not visible, nor touchable – we are people who have come believe and who know that God speaks. Our faith tradition teaches us that the Word was not self-generated, but was generated at the will of and for the purposes of God. Out of God's communicative expression, the Word came to be, and we encounter the Word in many ways:

God's creative word spoken that brought forth all; God's Word spoken through prophets like Moses, Isaiah, Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr.; God's Word made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ; and we witness God's Word expressed and brought to life in our encounters with friends, family, co-workers, neighbors and with one another.

With a word, God called Abram to step out into the night sky. The sun had set, the busyness of the day was done, and darkness had come. All necessary conditions for one to be able to fully see and witness the grandeur of the heavens. In this sacred moment, God speaks and Abram hears; hears his promise that he will give him descendants as vast as the stars in the sky. Of course, God doesn't say how, or when. But Abram hears, and believes, and trusts God's promise. And although he cannot see or touch God in the flesh, he knows, he feels, with certainty in his heart that God is present and active in his life, and has spoken.

This is the faith to which Hebrews calls us: a faith in God who perhaps cannot be proven, that is borne out of a belief in what is truly incomprehensible. We can remember that although the stars in the blue of the daytime sky cannot be seen by our eyes, it does not mean they are not there. God continues to provide what is marvelous, and we can trust in it.

Could Abram have had any understanding of the depths of God's promise, of how all generations would come forth out of him? Perhaps not. But his choice to believe that through and with God, it was possible and worth hoping for, is what causes God to rename Abram as Abraham – "father of many nations."

Look around you. Who are your personal models of faith – the people who by their words, or examples, or ways of being inspire you? Perhaps it is someone like Martin Luther King Jr., whose belief that God stood for justice and cared for the poor and oppressed, anchored him in his life's work for justice. Maybe you have seen faith modeled in an elderly grandparent or friend, who faithfully cared for their dying spouse with grace and humility, ever certain of God's presence and promise? Or perhaps you have seen faith modeled in the quiet perseverance of one who suffers. How do you recognize faith in others, or in yourself?

Although I can't be sure, I like to believe that God was speaking to my Dad on those summer nights when he lay, gazing into the heavens, slowly rekindling in him a faith that had been lost with the death of his child. Although it would be many years, my father did make his way back to church, to community and to the God that had always been with him – rediscovering a faith that would sustain him through the rest of his life.

Such faith is also what Jesus speaks to in our Gospel – the complexity of living in the present moment of the kingdom of God on earth right now – active and alive – and being ready and alert for the realm of God to come. Jesus calls us to model him – to give and share what we can with others, to let go of our attachments to earthly things that bind us up, and to choose to faithfully trust God's promises and plans for us. Jesus is the Word sent into the world, the one we follow and serve. He is our master, and we are called to serve him in faith with thanksgiving. He also promises that upon his return, if we are present and aware and ready, he will gather us for a feast, serving us as he served his disciples. As Jesus washed his disciple's feet and fed them with bread and wine, so too are we fed today – and so too will we be fed when Christ returns. So, we can hold tight to Jesus' words: Do not worry. Do not be afraid, little flock. Have faith and believe. For it is the father's pleasure to give you the kingdom. It is his pleasure that we should draw near to him in hope, with trust, and in faith.