

The Challenge of Faith – Bob Munshaw

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14:22-33

My life revolves around reading books right now. I have a big, bad exam coming up in just a couple months, and so my life goes like this – morning – coffee at Adam Bros or Jos – after noon – coffee at the library, and like it or not, a book in hand and many a note to take.

Anyways, the other day, I dipped into some rather deep theological reading from two sources that speak to the issue of faith. The first is from the great medieval philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas. On the issue of faith, Aquinas wrote, “Faith has to do with things that are not seen and hope with things that are not at hand.” – I think that’s a pretty good definition. Let’s hear it again – “Faith has to do with things that are not seen and hope with things that are not at hand.”

My second theological reading was a story written by a fellow named Watterson, one of my favorite theological writers. Hope it’s ok if I share it with you...

Calvin was out for a walk with his stuffed tiger, Hobbes, when the two ran across a badly injured baby raccoon. Well, they scoop up the little fella, bring him home, and try to save him. But, alas, it is to no avail. The next morning, when they wake up, they find that the little raccoon has died. That night, as Calvin and Hobbes lay in bed, Calvin shares his feelings ... questions that tug at the hearts of each of us, because they exude the stark honesty of a child

He says, “You know, Hobbes, I can’t figure out this death stuff. Why did that little raccoon have to die? He didn’t do anything wrong. He was just little! What’s the point of putting him here and taking him back so soon?!? It’s either mean or its arbitrary, and either way I’ve got the heebie-jeebies.” To which Hobbes responds, “Why is it always night when we talk about these things?”

The next day, Calvin continues to think about it. He says, “Mom says death is as natural as birth, and it’s all part of the life cycle. She says we don’t really understand it, but there are many things we don’t understand, and we just have to do the best we can with the knowledge we have. I guess that makes sense.”

We have to do the best we can with the knowledge we have And ultimately this is where the kind of faith that Thomas Aquinas was talking about comes in.

Faith is a funny thing. Most of us were raised to have faith in God. As children, perhaps we were taught to pray “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I die before

I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Faith in God is relatively easy when life is going well. Faith in God is not so hard when you have a good paying job, your family life is stable, and nobody close to you is sick, or dying, or depressed. But, life is not always so tidy. Sometimes, life can be absolute misery.

Sometimes we bring misery into our lives through our own poor choices, and sometimes misery just barges into our lives completely uninvited, and turns everything upside down, and like Calvin, we wonder if God is mean, or arbitrary, or maybe we wonder if God is there at all.

Our Scripture texts today seem to me to be gathered around questions of faith. I love it when we run across these stories in our lectionary readings. You get these interesting Bible characters who pull off all sorts of shenanigans. In my childhood memories, these guys and gals of Israel looked and seemed to act perfect as they sat on the flanalgraph boards in Sunday School. They must have been perfect. They were the heroes of the faith, the patriarchs, the disciples of Jesus. In Sunday school, it seemed that the good guys and gals of the Bible stories could do no wrong ... that their faith was impenetrable. But of course it doesn't take too much reading to see that this is hogwash. The people of the Bible were, as Dr. Jensen would say, miserable wretches just like you and me.

Thomas doubted the resurrection, David, the man after God's own heart, was an adulterer and a murderer, and of course there was kind old Elisha the prophet. When a group of boys were mocking him, and calling him baldy, he called down a curse on them (in the name of the Lord), and on came two bears to do a number on them.

And today we have two more wretches like us, Peter and Joseph.

Well, over the last few weeks, we have spent some quality time with Jacob, the grasper ... Jacob the wrestler ... who took on God, and received a new name. We remember that he had the whole wife and handmaiden thing going on ... but that he ended up working a full 14 years employed to the treacherous Laban, to finally win Rachel's hand ... and the Genesis record tells us that the children came early and often for Leah, and for the handmaidens, but not so for Jacob's beloved Rachel. And so when Joseph was finally born to Rachel, it must have felt such a blessing ... and when Jacob's dearest darling Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, old Jacob must have felt that in those two boys, Jo Jo, and Little Benji, he could hold on, if ever so slightly to Rachel and her memory.

So, Jo and Benji were spoiled. As little ones, they got the nicest new dradels. They received a camel for their bar mitzvah, while each of the other 10 of Jacob's sons merely got a measly goat, and they always got the easiest chores, and extra servings of dessert, and later bed times, — ok, I did make up that last bit, but Joseph did get a snappy looking coat. I grew up thinking of it as the coat of many colours, but the Hebrew word describing the coat is unknown. Suffice to say, it was pretty sweet, sweet enough that the brothers were all jealous. The one I am holding here is merely a replica, made by my daughter and a few friends. If you were paying attention

during the readings this morning, you will remember that the original robe was torn up by the brothers. So, we'll have to make do with the replica.

Our lectionary reading doesn't include the dreams Joseph shared with his brothers, where the whole family bows down to him, but we all remember that the brothers didn't very much love the dreams of Joseph. We heard in the passage that they had learned to hate Joseph with such a passion, that when they saw him coming with the message from Jacob, they debated killing him, and would have done it if not for Reuben. As it is, they sold him to be a slave in Egypt.

And thus ends the Old Testament reading for today. Of course, we know that the story goes on ... a story that includes Joseph's faithfulness and God's deliverance, and I'm sure we'll hear about that in the next couple weeks. But our text ends with Joseph, the spoiled brat, his head full of dashed dreams, heading for a life of slavery, perhaps wondering what had happened to God's promises. It can't be easy to hold on to faith when you are shackled in chains, marching through the desert, and looking forward to a life as a slave. Sometimes we are asked to soldier on in faith in spite of how things look ... to believe, and to trust and obey, even when it takes great faith to do so

Each week, Kathy faithfully lifts up to God, friends and family who are suffering with cancer, and I remember and pray for my friend Ramsy, husband and father of a young family, who seems on his way to losing his battle with cancer. Ramsy's wife Shannon is a real optimist, but a couple weeks ago, she titled her blog – "Uphill through the fog, both ways, in bare feet, in four foot snow drifts"—Ramsy and Shannon know the prognosis, and they know that if God does not intervene, Ramsy will die. They have accepted the fact that their family is being marched through a desert of despair, and in spite of their faith, you can't help but wonder if like Calvin, they are seriously wondering why ... why has God allowed this?

So, what does it mean to be one of the people of faith? What is the promise of God to the faithful? The Psalmist invites us to praise God, to rejoice in the mighty works of God. And the Psalmist points to the end of the Joseph story, reminding the reader that there is more going on behind the story than we can always see; that indeed God has been at work in the story both for Joseph, and for all God's people. This is not to say that things always turn up rosy for a Christian in this world. No matter how we might want to interpret the passage in Romans 8 that reads that all things work together for good for those that love God, the reality is that we may never understand how something has worked out for our good in this lifetime. There are plenty of Joseph type stories in the world where things don't appear to have happy endings at all. What do we do with those stories? The Psalmist's answer is to invite us to reflect on how God has been faithful in our lives in the past. Remember his works, his goodness, his grace, and look to the Lord and His strength. Here, we are encouraged not to lean on our own reason and understanding, but to grant God His place as Lord in our lives and in His world.

Tuning to the Gospel reading and Peter, we encounter another guy with a bit of a spotty record. I'm not going to spend quality time with Peter, but we recognize that here, too, there are issues of faith at stake.

We might think of Peter as Mr. Emotional Roller Coaster Boy. He had some great moments. He was always getting invited, along with the brothers, James and John, when Jesus was about to do something really special. So, he got to witness a couple resurrections and healings from right in the front row, so to speak. We also all know the details of how at the trial of Jesus, Peter denied even knowing Him.

Yet, there is something to admire about Peter. Good Old Peter – He could be impulsive, and reckless, and a loudmouth; but you've got to give him credit – he sorely wanted to experience the work of God in his life; God's real power and presence. So, in the middle of the night, during a terrible storm that threatened to sink their boat and drown all the disciples ... suddenly there is Jesus – walking towards the disciples on the water, and Peter sees the opportunity and asks – “Would you command me to walk on the water”. Peter's faith and his doubt mix together in those awesome moments. He takes a few tentative steps forward as he looks in the eyes of Jesus, but as a veteran fisherman, he had no doubt seen the sea swallow a number of people in his lifetime, and as he looks at the terrible swells crashing about him, his fear gets the best of him, and his fear wins out over his faith, and in a panic, he begins to sink.

Maybe we think that we would have done better than Peter.. Surely, knowing who Jesus is, you and I would have had the courage to run around skipping from wave top, to wave top, wouldn't we? At least, it's easy to imagine we would be that brave as we sit in a warm, dry room, on solid pews, but in the midst of that storm, I'm guessing that closer to the truth is that I'd have been in the boat bailing water as fast as I could, yelling for Jesus to quit fooling around and do something to save us.

Faith and doubt both are and will be a part of our faith journey during our entire lives. While we will probably never walk on the water, there will be some peak moments as we follow Jesus. But, there will also be some days in the desert that we may not understand at the time, or that we may not understand in this life. I pray that in both our brightest and our darkest days, we will hear the words of St. Paul in Romans 10, and have the faith to call upon the Lord for our salvation, remembering the words of Augustine that “Faith is to believe what we do not see, and the reward of faith is to see what we believe.”

Amen