

What is Faith? – Teresa Holden

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

What is Faith?

Today's Scriptures and where we find ourselves in the liturgical year, in the Season of Lent, lead me to consider a fundamental question today. That question is – "what is faith?" Certainly, we are all at church this morning, so we agree that faith is important, but stripped down to where we live everyday, how do we experience our faith? What role does it play in our lives? What does God want us to know about faith? To borrow from a college freshman I know who recently wrote a paper about faith, it probably is something we can't comprehensively define in one sermon because it is something we keep learning about and growing in our knowledge of over the course of our lifetimes. Still, I think it's important in this season when we all reflect on the promise of Christ's life, death and resurrection, it's important to also meditate on defining questions about faith.

In order to do this, I would like to consider today's Scriptures in light of the clearest definition of faith that emerges from the Bible. This comes from Hebrews 11:1. I prefer to think about this Scripture in the words of the King James version, as it offers some useful imagery. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith in this way: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." To me, this definition is very helpful. It implies two things about faith. First, faith is actual; it's real – it has substance. Something with substance can't be ignored or passed over – it takes up some sort of metaphorical space and has to be reckoned with. Second of all, faith is evidence – in and of itself, it provides proof that something we don't see exists. The story of Abram provides a compelling example of what faith looks like as a lived experience. In this story from Genesis we see that the exercise of faith isn't easy; it always flirts with doubt. But even in the face of doubt, God, Himself, remains faithful.

In our passage from Genesis, Abram, the original patriarch of Judaism, has a dialogue with God about an issue that comes from the depth of Abram's soul – he wants heirs, heirs who are his own flesh and blood. At an advanced age, Abram and his wife Sarai find themselves to be childless. This is not the first conversation Abram and God have had about this topic of heirs. Perhaps, Abram's initial frustration in today's passage comes from the fact that he and God have been talking about this subject for a long time. From the beginning of their relationship, God has been promising that Abram would have heirs. We see this in Genesis 12: 1-3, 6-7 "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. ⁶ "Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. ⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring ^[a] I will give this land.'

And again in Genesis 13: 14-17: ¹⁴ The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. ¹⁵ All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring ¹⁶forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. ¹⁷ Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”

So, we see, this is an old topic of conversation. Here in Genesis 15, God gives Abram a sign; He comes in a fire as evidence that He is actually there, listening, promising to Abram this (by now) seemingly impossible request. The rest of the story, of course, is that after God’s assurances to him in Genesis 15, Abram and Sarai continue to advance in age without having a child. Far beyond being of child-bearing age, they take matters into their own hands. They execute their backup plan which is for Abram to have a child with Sarai’s handmaiden, Hagar. After all of this is accomplished and when Abram is 99 years old, God comes back to Abram, and basically says, “ok. I’m ready – let’s get this show on the road. We’re changing your name and Sarai’s name, and we’re havin’ a baby.” Sure enough, that’s what happens. Baby Isaac comes into the lives of the newly named Abraham and Sarah, and they become parents for the first time.

So in the story of the Patriarch Abram (Abraham), we see him struggle with having faith for the thing that was very most important thing to him. He struggles for many reasons despite assurances and signs from God. Most of all he struggles because God’s timing is a total mystery to him. The longer he has to wait, the harder it is to have faith and the easier it is to doubt.

Really, all of today’s Scriptures have to do with having faith within God’s ideas of time.

Psalm 27 ¹⁴ says: Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus tells the Pharisees who warn him of Herod’s desire to kill him, that they need not warn Him, as all things will be accomplished in His time according to God’s plan.

Like Abraham, we all struggle with faith and time. That’s where we live; we just can’t get our heads around God’s timing, but the one very clear instruction the Bible gives is to wait, to not run ahead, but to stay within the path God has set before us. This reminds me of some wisdom I’ve frequently heard my dad tell college students, and that is – if you’re in college, that’s what God called you to do, to be in college. Do the very best you can in college; then see what’s next. That’s a way of saying – stay the course, don’t get impatient, but wait for the Lord.

A second thing we all struggle with is what exactly we can or are allowed to have faith about. Abraham had a promise from God about the thing he wanted the most. But what about us?

What is legitimate for us to have faith for and about? What is the promise God has given us? Just as Abram's promise lay within his own body, similarly, God's promise to you is within you. He has blessed you with your own unique set of gifts, talents and interests that He wants to see flourish.

I believe God's promise to each of us unfolds over the course of a lifetime. When I was a child, I loved the Olympics, it didn't matter if it was the Winter or Summer Olympics, I would watch the coverage on TV, and I would dream of having some ability at that level. In my day, the Winter Olympic hero was Bonnie Blair, the speed skater. For some reason, when I was young, as I watched Bonnie Blair, I thought the action of speed skating looked like something I would be able to do. I would work my way down our long hallway in our house mimicking the speed skating motion – back bent, arms swinging, legs digging into the ground. In time, God and common sense enlightened me – I grew out of this illusion that speed skating was my destiny. That wasn't the skill set God gave me. (I've actually come to wonder if I missed my calling to the sport of curling – that looks like something I might be good at.) God didn't call me to these things because I'm no good at them. Those things aren't His promise to me; He didn't promise to put me in the position of being the world's greatest speed skater. On the other hand, as I've grown as a person and in my faith, I've come to realize my true passions, and I've come to see that the issues, people and places I care so deeply about are truly God's promise to me. So, I think God helps us to synthesize our abilities, our desires and His will. As we ask, and dream and wait, we also grow, and God makes a path clear.

Of course, the reason why God has embedded His promise within you isn't for you to be selfish with your gifts. Rather, you reflect the greatness of God through His promise that is within you. As you use the gifts and abilities He has given you, you testify to His presence in your life. God doesn't put limitations on the abilities or the promise He has given you. To Abraham, He clearly explained in concrete, temporal terms: He said Abram's offspring would be as numerous as dust particles or as stars in the sky. From Abram's perspective, these descriptions must have seemed more than unbelievable, even a little crazy. But God doesn't limit the promise He's given each of us, rather He thinks in expansive terms – anything we can imagine He thinks of from the perspective of an even bigger vision.

Philippians 3 ²⁰ says "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." In part this passage refers to our need for a heavenly body that will not grow old or age like our earthly bodies. Yet, the fact of our heavenly citizenship indicates the process of transformation is even now taking place through our faith, and it is evidenced in so many ways among people here at St. Paul's. Whether it be through what you do in your vocation, hobby, sport, art, music, or free time, the substance and evidence of faith is evident. An example that people in the Greenville community bring to my attention is the work that a number of people from St. Paul's do at the prison. I know a number of people who work at the prison, and on more than one occasion they have commented to me about what a blessing your efforts are to the prisoners. These actions

are the substance and evidence of faith. In this season of Lent, as we reflect on the gift of Jesus, we should also celebrate the gift of faith God gives to all who seek Him.