

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: August 12, 2007

Texts: Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16; Luke 12:32-40

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There's a part of me that feels as if summer preaching, like summer worship, should be a little lighter and breezier. But the lectionary committee doesn't seem to agree with me! In fact, they seem to have a tendency to pack some of the most intense passages in all of scripture into the summer months. That leads us (if we are taking our cues from the day's readings) to discuss some pretty big stuff on these August weekends.

Today, the readings seem to coalesce around the question of what faith is and what it is not. They are rich texts that deserve a lifetime of reflection, but for today I just want to say one thing about what Biblical faith is not and three things about what it is.

As far as I can tell, from Genesis to Revelation, Biblical faith is not about intellectual assent to certain doctrines. This seems so obvious to me. And yet there is a tradition within western Christianity, shaped by the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason that has led many of us to believe just the opposite. There are Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant versions of this way of thinking that reduces faith to what we think we know—to a *belief* system.

Recent letters to the *Telegram and Gazette* illustrate the point. A week or so ago, in defense of the Vatican's recent pronouncements that all other denominations are not really part of "the Church," a woman wrote a passionate defense of the Church she clearly loves. She argued that Jesus founded Roman Catholicism by sending St. Peter to Rome to be the first pope and there has been a straight line from there to Benedict, and if you aren't connected to the Church through that straight line you aren't really part of the Church. Intellectually it is an untenable position. She displayed no awareness of the apostolic mission that went not just to Rome but to Antioch and Alexandria and in fact began in Jerusalem—no respect for eastern orthodoxy that is at least as old as the church in Rome, let alone for the need that arose for a Protestant Reformation. So be it; she is entitled to her opinion. People can argue until the cows come home about their *beliefs*, but in the end it always seems to come down to who is in and who is out. And those who disagree with what you believe are out.

So I was interested to read a response to her letter this week. The writer is clearly an evangelical who sees himself on exactly the opposite side from the first writer. For him there is a great mistrust in institutional Christianity in general and Roman Catholicism in particular. For him Christian community is formed by a confession that Jesus is "personal Lord and savior"—and anyone who utters those words is in. (And anyone who does not is out.) While they see themselves at opposite ends of the theological spectrum, however, I want to suggest that they are closer to each other than they realize. Both are fixated on faith as *right belief*. Now I don't know either of these two people and I'm sure their faith is real for them; my intent is not to denigrate that. But it is to say that these ways of understanding faith seem to me to leave very little room for God. For both writers, faith is so settled, so formulaic, so certain—that it is unclear to me at least where the living God fits into it all.

Clearly the Episcopal Church isn't immune from this tendency to argue over what we *believe*. But in the end, I think those arguments are characterized by no small amount of hubris. Our beliefs change as we go through life. And if they don't we stop growing, we end up locked into the past—defending a system of beliefs that deep in our own guts we may know are untenable. We close ourselves off to all that challenges what we are certain we already know. My reading of the Bible suggests that this is a form of idolatry.

So if I'm right about this, then what is faith if it is not about our belief systems? Listen again to these texts before us today, two from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament. I think together they form the contours of Biblical faith.

1. Faith is the antidote to fear. Fear immobilizes us while faith brings freedom. From the very beginning of the biblical story, all the way back to the fifteenth chapter of the first scroll of the Torah, the Lord comes to Abraham in a vision and says, "do not be afraid, Abraham." Think about how many times in the Bible the angel of the Lord comes to someone, or God comes in a vision or a dream to someone—to Mary, to Joseph, to Peter, to Paul—to say "don't be scared...it's going to be alright." In today's gospel reading Jesus says to his disciples—not just to the twelve but to all of his followers down through the ages—to us on this day in this place: "do not be afraid, little flock." Let God be God: let go and let God be God, so that you can be yourself...so you can tap into your gifts and receive the kingdom of God.

We are not all afraid of the same things. Some of us are more scared of success, I think, than of failure. Some of us are scared of the dark while others may be more afraid of the light of day. Some of us are afraid of dying and others of us are afraid to live. But whatever our fears, they always work in the same way: they constrict us. They paralyze us. They lock us into old patterns and block out God's Holy Spirit. Whatever else Biblical faith is or is not it is at the very core about trust—not about beliefs. It is about that basic fundamental trust in the God made known to us in Jesus, who frees us to also trust ourselves and others. That isn't easy, Lord knows (or there wouldn't be so many angels showing up in the Bible to remind us about it!). But working on trust issues is very different than trying to make sure we are working out right belief; it's much more intentionally a work-in-progress than something we solve once and for all.

2. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. That is how the writer of Hebrews puts it, and then (I love this): it is about finding our way home. Faith is a journey. There is something deep within us that desires more—desires as this writer puts it—a better country. It doesn't mean we can't be satisfied with what is, but faith is also about God's dream of a better tomorrow. Faith is about knowing that one day people really will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character; and never giving up hope that it shall be so and working toward that day as we find our way home. Faith is about that yearning, and the willingness to take steps toward making it so.

3. Faith—at least Biblical faith—is not for lone-rangers; it's communal. We need each other. As I read those two letters in the newspaper my demented and twisted Episcopal brain thought that what those two writers really need is a faith community like this one where both are welcomed and challenged to sit next to each other for a while and worship together, and then perhaps strike up a conversation. In so doing it might be possible for each to be an instrument of peace for the

other; in the relationship each might come to a deeper and more authentic conversion. When we discover ourselves to be part of something bigger than ourselves, we can hold hands and walk together. There is so much we disagree about in this congregation. But when we can learn to accept one another with all of our idiosyncrasies, and by the grace of God allow ourselves to be accepted by others for all of ours, then transformation can happen. Easter happens as the risen Christ is made known among us, and through us.

So the psalmist sings to God in the 20<sup>th</sup> verse of the 33<sup>rd</sup> psalm: “*Our* soul waits for the Lord; the Lord is *our* help and our shield.” It is an odd, mystical way to state it. We tend to think of my soul and your soul and somebody else’s soul and then if we can find common ground we can all sit together and pray to God. But the psalmist seems to me to be suggesting a deeper truth and a deeper mystery: that we find ourselves when we find one another, that we are not a faith community in isolation but only as we come together as a Body and recognize that we are together being formed and reformed by the grace of God. *Our* soul waits, and then in the next verse, *our* heart rejoices.

These three components of faith—trust over fear, the journey home, and community—remind me that Biblical faith is not unlike Dorothy and her friends on that yellow-brick road. Or maybe like Harry and Ron and Hermione trying to grow up in an unsteady and confusing world, and along the way courageously confronting the evil powers of this world that seek to destroy the children of God.

The community that keeps Jesus at the center is able, by the grace of God, to make room for others. We keep the doors open, and we keep “our heart” open—expecting God to be present and made known. Such a community is defined not by agreement, but by grace alone. Such a community is about cultivating relationships with both God and neighbor. It’s about making a place we can all call “home.”

In her investiture sermon, our presiding bishop quoted Robert Frost, who wrote that “home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.” I think that’s a pretty good working definition of what the Church in this time and place is meant to be about and I think it is what this congregation is trying to be about. My experience tells me that such a place encourages spiritual growth because none of us are there yet; and we need one another. Whether or not we write it in a letter to the newspaper, my prayer is that we are embodying that kind of biblical faith as a visible witness to a world in need of another way.