

What is faith? To be more specific, what is *Christian* faith, rooted and informed by Holy Scripture and guided by God's Holy Spirit? This week and next I want to explore that question in a two-part sermon on the readings from Hebrews.

This past Monday I drove with my son, James, to American University in Washington, DC where he attended a conference this week. I did the eight-hour drive back alone on Tuesday, looking forward to that time to reflect. I had that whole stretch on the New Jersey Turnpike – from the Delaware Memorial Bridge across the George Washington Bridge into Manhattan. So I cranked my I-Pod with Bruce Springsteen through the swamps of Jersey. It was a truly mystical experience!

I decided to come up I-684 and crossed into Connecticut at Danbury, and by that time I was pretty much “in the zone.” And then somewhere around Waterbury, I think it was, I saw a billboard that said, “Jesus is the *only* way to God.” *Only* was in a different color than the other words and italicized. The bottom of the billboard referenced John 14:9, a verse especially familiar to me of late because it's from one of the gospel readings often read at funerals. The mood was broken for me, even as a person who absolutely does believe Jesus is the Way, because these words seemed to me more like a threat than a promise; more like fighting words than good news—especially with that *only* highlighted.

Like every verse in the Bible, there is always a larger context. Chapter fourteen of John's Gospel is part of what the scholars call the “farewell discourse.” This discourse is addressed to Jesus' disciples: “marching orders” about how to be the Church after he is crucified. Chapter fourteen begins with these words: “*do not let your hearts be troubled...*” There is no doubt much sadness in that room as John recounts these words, which is one reason they are so appropriate for funerals. But Jesus says that beyond his death there is life and that in his Abba's house there are many dwelling places. He says that he is going to prepare a place for them, that he is going to get things ready. And then he says: “*you know where I am going.*”

One of my favorite things about the Gospels is that they resist idealizing the disciples. They get things wrong again and again. I find that a great comfort because it seems to suggest that if those dolts could follow Jesus, then maybe *we* can too. They were just ordinary people with lots of questions. In the fourteenth chapter of John, it's Thomas who speaks up. Jesus says, “you know where I am going.” And Thomas responds...

...excuse me, Lord; um, no we don't. You talk in riddles half the time and very often we just don't understand what you are saying. I'm sorry, Lord, but it's true and someone needs to say it. We just don't always know what you mean so could you just spell it out in plain Aramaic? *Where exactly is it that you are you going?*

That's when Jesus says it. Essentially as I read him, his words are offered as comfort to his closest friends, not words intended to threaten unbelievers. He says:

...stick with me, kid. You know me; stay close and you'll be alright, I promise. Because *I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Abba except through me.* .

Now it is Philip's turn to ask the question: “No really, Jesus—will you show us Abba?” And Jesus says, “Lord, have mercy! Where did I find these people? *If you've seen me you've seen God.*”

Now my point is simply this: the Farewell Discourse is a *conversation* among people who are scared about getting lost and worried about losing their friend. To take half of one verse from that context and emphasize the word “only” as if it is a veiled threat not only gives faith a bad name, in my humble opinion, but is hardly the best approach to draw people in to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Suggesting to people that they “better believe in Jesus or else...” me embarrassed as a Christian. But moreover, I don’t think that is faith. Recently a contemporary Roman Catholic theologian has said that “ideology is what you have when you don’t have faith.” I would simply add that there is a lot of ideology out there (on both the right and the left) masquerading as faith these days. And yet this is part of the culture we live in. It’s hard to preach the good news at all times, and when necessary to use words, not only because we live in a *culture* of disbelief but because so often the Church is as much a part of the problem as it is a help.

Which brings me to Hebrews, and back to square one. Biblical faith, according to the writer of Hebrews, is not about certitude, nor is it about telling others what they need to believe. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.*

Faith is a journey. There is no more Biblical statement about faith that I can make than that. From Genesis to Revelation, God’s people are a pilgrim people, a people “on the way.” *Come, and follow me.* Faith begins when we are willing to put our trust in God. The writer of Hebrews gives many examples from the past, some of whom we’ll explore a bit further next weekend. But he begins with Abraham and Sarah, way back in Genesis. He begins with people who set out from their homeland and left their family and friends for a place they didn’t yet know. They trusted the God who promised them a future. God may well have been their help in “ages past,” but faith is about trusting that same God to be their hope *for years to come.*

Someone asked me recently about my call to the priesthood. I told them it came in waves, and still continues. It wasn’t a one-time thing for me. I didn’t wake up one morning and feel called to the priesthood because of a voice I heard the night before and then get a map that led me directly to Holden. I was searching for something, particularly during my formative college years after the sudden death of my father. I wasn’t sure what it was exactly or where it would lead. But for me, at least, it began to seem that the life I was meant to lead wasn’t going to be discovered by heading to law school after college.

Now let me be clear: I don’t think that’s because one can’t find God by practicing law. I spent my whole childhood convinced that is what I was called to do with my life and I didn’t set that aside lightly or easily. In fact, I still on occasion wonder about that path not travelled, especially when there are openings on the Supreme Court. Even when I began to talk with the Commission on Ministry and applied to seminary, I was pretty sure it was not to be a *parish* minister and I was honest about that. I set out on a journey, assuming I’d end up in a PhD program eventually and teaching. As recently as fourteen years ago, after having spent four years in campus ministry and four years as a curate in a parish, I found myself interviewing for a job as chaplain at Trinity College.

I ended up being their second choice. It was disconcerting for me, because I didn't know then what it all meant. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do next. But in sending me back to the drawing board, it led me to consider what it might be like to be a rector of a parish. Keep in mind that at that time I was almost 35 years old, and I'd been ordained for almost a decade, but I still didn't know what I was called to be or do when I grew up! As those who were on the Search Committee here may recall, I was pretty honest that I wasn't sure whether or not I was called to be a rector, but I felt it was where God was leading me. And I hoped we might figure it out together. Well, more or less most of you know the rest of the story or at least parts of it and here we are. It has been a good and life-giving match to come here, a match that has pretty much let Rich be Rich. A lot of time has passed: a lot of sermons, funerals, baptisms, weddings, vestry meetings, staff meetings, and worship services. I don't know if we are "there" yet because I'm not sure where "there" is. But in the midst of it all I think there has been mutual discovery as St. Francis becomes more what God intends and as I have been able to explore what it means to be pastor, preacher, and teacher.

Now this is a part of my story and this sermon is far more autobiographical than most of the sermons I preach. But I think the writer of Hebrews means to point us in that direction. Your story is different from mine; but hopefully in sharing part of my own spiritual autobiography you may hear echoes of your own journey in mine. Underneath this is an assumption that faith is lived out in people; it's not abstract but incarnate. Just as Abraham and Sarah each had their own stories, so do each of us. We have come here by different routes, which is simply to acknowledge that there is no cookie-cutter approach to faith and you don't indoctrinate people to make them Christians. You learn to tell your story and to see that each and every story is sacred. In fact because of your particular story you might have driven by that same billboard I did and said, "praise the Lord" because for you those words may well have been good news. So be it.

If faith is something we discover, and uncover, along the way in our journeys, then that suggests to me that the Church is more like a community of explorers than anything else, that our work is to try to create a space where we can become the people God means for us to become. There are ups and downs, uncertainties and questions, along the way. Abraham and Sarah couldn't conceive a child in a world before in-vitro fertilization. The Book of Genesis chronicles their anxiety and attempts to solve this crisis, including adoption and surrogacy. But ultimately, in their old age, they are shocked to have a son named Isaac and the story continues. As we heard today, *therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."*

They and others were seeking a homeland. At times they got drawn back into the past, thinking of the land they left behind. But again and again they were called to remain open, to keep discovering, to keep growing, and to follow the Way which unfortunately wasn't always so clear as a Yellow Brick Road. So it is with us. With God's help, we continue to follow the One who is the Way, the One who is the Truth, the One who is Life.

If we follow him, then we don't need to worry about getting lost, because He is with us along the Way. That, I think, in a nutshell what faith is about. And I think that it's good news that is worth sharing with the world, news the world desperately needs. It's just much harder to fit all that on a billboard. I guess that means we have to try to live it.