

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost – Year C
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- SERMON -

A small boy riding a bus home from Sunday school was very proud of the card he had received, which had a picture and a caption that read, “Have Faith in God.” Then to his dismay the card slipped from his hand and fluttered out the window. “Stop the bus!” he cried. “I’ve lost my ‘faith in God!’”

The driver pulled the bus to a stop, and as the lad climbed out and went to retrieve his card, one of the adult riders smiled and made a comment about the innocence of youth. A more perceptive adult observed, “All of us would be better off if we were that concerned about our faith.”

So, what is faith, anyway? We hear that word all the time, don’t we?

Hebrews Chapter 11, which we read from this morning, is known as the Faith Chapter. In verse 1 of that chapter, the Common English Bible reads, “Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see.” Some of us may be more familiar with the KJV, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Same meaning, just different words.

We saw in Genesis this morning that the Lord’s word came to Abram in a vision saying, “Don’t be afraid, Abram. I am your protector. Your reward will be very great.” But Abram said, “Lord God, what can you possibly give me, since I still have no children? Since you haven’t given me any children, the head of my household will be my heir.”

The Lord’s word came immediately to him, “This man will not be your heir. Your heir will definitely be your very own biological child.” Then he brought Abram outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars if you think you can count them. This is how many children you will have.”

And ... here it is ... “Abram TRUSTED the Lord.”

I’ve shared this example before, but everyone here is, right now, experiencing faith. Yep, when you came in, you might have greeted someone, then you went to the pew you’re sitting on and – you might have tapped it, shaken it a bit to check the stability, got on your knees and looked underneath to see if the proper fittings were there, then you, reluctantly, hesitantly sat down. Right?

No?

Oh! Then you came in, maybe greeted someone, then you went to the pew of your choice and -- sat down! You just sat down! Totally trusting, having the faith that it was going to hold you, as well as anyone else sitting on that same pew. Right? That's faith.

Also known as "trust."

Let's go back to Hebrews Chapter 11 where we see people who put their trust in God. Verse 2 says "The elders in the past were approved because they showed faith."

Verse 3 - By faith we understand that the universe has been created by a word from God.

Verse 4 - By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice...

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he didn't see death, and he wasn't found because God took him up.

By faith Noah responded with godly fear...and built an ark.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place where God said he would receive an inheritance. He stepped out – and didn't have a clue where he was going...

By faith even Sarah received the ability to have a child – in her old age.

By faith Abraham allowed himself to be tested greatly with his only son, Isaac.

By faith, Isaac...

By faith, Jacob...

By faith, Joseph...

By faith Moses...

By faith Rahab...

And by verse 32, Paul said, "What more can I say? I would run out of time if I told you about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Through faith they conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, realized promises, shut the mouths of lions, put out raging fires, escaped from the edge of the sword, found strength in weakness – (found strength in weakness! I like that.), were mighty in war, and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured and refused to be released so they could gain a better resurrection."

By faith!

There is a difference between believing something up here (in your mind), and believing something here (in your heart). Do you know that?

We're living in a very difficult time right now. I won't go into all the details because I don't have to. You've got them on your TV, on the news, on your social media sources - you've got it. But I prefer this ground to be holy and free from the stresses caused by these stories.

But because of all that's going on today, I want to share some things I feel will be helpful to each of us as we go through the fear and the unknown.

First, we have a God who loves us. A God who stands ready to guide us, to comfort us, to carry us through the tough times.

And because of, or in spite of, these situations going on, I believe many of you have come here this morning seeking God, wanting to know God's presence and recognize God's activity – in your life and in the world. You are hungry for a faith that will support you, empower you, and offer meaning, direction, and a sense of purpose to your life.

Whatever that purpose or calling is, maybe the first purpose he has called you to – is to himself.

I remember the words from what is known as King George VI's greatest speech. As 1939 drew to a close, on the Eve of the first day of 1940, with all the horrors of the bombing of London just ahead, and with fear and foreboding all around, he spoke these words to the nation: "And I said to the one who stood at the gate of the year 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the Unknown.' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'"

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God." That seems to me to be a wonderful description of what Christians mean when we talk about living by faith. That is what it means to trust God – making that journey into God and into God's kingdom by actually allowing ourselves to go into the darkness and putting our hand into God's hand, and take those first steps of trust.

Abram did. He trusted God to lead him to wherever God had in mind. He stepped out – in total faith.

Sometimes total faith is in standing, ready, waiting for the master (our Lord) to come, as we saw in our Gospel reading. In faith, knowing He is coming and just being available.

That makes me think of when my husband, Bob, and I are working on a project together and there are parts of the project when I don't have a clue what needs to be done. It's an area that Bob knows fully well, but he needs assistance. So, I just hang around, available. He may ask me

to hand him something, or to hold something steady so he can do something with it, or to write down some measurements... I'm just there, ready, available.

In God's ministry many times we just allow ourselves to be available. You may have heard the phrase: God isn't looking for your ability as much as He is looking for your availability.

An example of that heartfelt faith comes from the writings of psychologist Robert Coles.

In the early 1960's, Harvard psychologist Robert Coles spent time with four black six-year-old girls who initiated school desegregation in New Orleans. He had become fascinated with the "stoic courage" with which these girls faced the ordeal of walking to school under the protection of federal marshals, as crowds of angry protesters hurled obscenities and threats at them.

Coles says he became especially interested in the relationship between Tessie, one of the six-year-old girls, and her grandmother, Martha, whom he describes as "a tall, handsome woman, carefully groomed," with a "big laugh that shook her ample body and was sometimes punctuated by a clap or two of her hands and a two-word exclamation: 'Lord Almighty!'"

One day, he reports, Tessie suggested over breakfast that perhaps, for the first time, she would stay home from school. Coles was present at the breakfast table, and witnessed and recorded Martha's response:

"It's no picnic, child — I know that, Tessie—going to that school. Lord Almighty, if I could just go with you, and stop there in front of that building, and call all those people to my side, and read to them from the Bible, and tell them, remind them, that He's up there, Jesus, watching over all of us — it don't matter who you are and what your skin color is. But I stay here, and you go... So I'm not the one to tell you that you should go, because here I am, and I'll be watching television and eating or cleaning things up while you're walking by those folks. But I'll tell you, you're doing them a great favor; you're doing them a service, a big service."

Coles then reports, *"She stopped briefly to pick up a fly swatter and go after a bee that had noisily appeared in the kitchen. She hit it and watched it fall to the floor; then she plucked a tissue from a box on a counter, picked up the bee, still alive, and took it outside, where it flew off. I was surprised; I'd expected her to kill the bee and put its remains in the wastebasket. She resumed speaking and, again to my surprise, connected her rescue of the bee to what she had started to say."*

"'You see, my child, you have to help the good Lord with His world! He puts us here—and He calls us to help Him out. That bee doesn't belong here; it belongs out there. You belong in that McDonough School, and there will be a day when everyone knows that, even those poor folks—Lord, I pray for them! — those poor, poor folks out there shouting their heads off at you. You're one of the Lord's people; He's put His Hand on you. He's given a call to you, a call to service—in His name! There's all those people, scared out of their minds, and by the time you're ready to leave the McDonough School they'll be all calmed down, and they won't be paying you no mind at all, child, and I'll guarantee you, that's how it will be!'"

“As she was speaking, Tessie finished her breakfast, marched confidently to the sink with her dishes, put them in a neat pile, and went to get her raincoat and empty lunch pail from her room—all without saying a word. She was going to school...”

That is what faith rooted in the heart looks like. Faith is not just believing that certain claims or statements about God are true. Genuine faith presumes a *relationship with God*. It implies a radical trust in God, faithfulness in one's relationship with God, and a way of seeing the world as life-giving and nourishing rather than hostile and threatening.

That is the faith that shines so clearly in the life of Martha; that allows her to be loving, joyful and free, even in the midst of life's sufferings. She trusts in God completely, she is deeply faithful to this relationship, and as a result of it she is able to view life with hope and courage, even when faced with hostility. That is the faith she is passing on to Tessie, a faith that will enable her to meet even the most difficult challenges of her life with hope and trust and love. That is the faith that transforms us, that empowers us, that gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

As we get to know our Lord, Jesus Christ more deeply and intimately, we become more confident in the object of our faith and less conscious of the faith itself. It is my hope that we get to know Jesus Christ in such a way that as naturally as breathing we will trust Him, and every day will become the adventure of letting God be God in all we do and say.

Major Ian Thomas, Co-Founder of the Torchbearers, said, “It is only the life of the Lord Jesus -- his activity, clothed with you and displayed through you, that gives that life, that joy, that peace that resonates through scripture. The moment we come to realize that only God can make a man or woman godly, we are left with no option but to find God, and to know God, and to let God be God in and through us, whoever He may be, and this will leave us with no margin for picking and choosing – for there is only one God, and He is absolute, and He made you expressly for Himself!”

How often have many of us, who have experienced a loving God, said, “I can't imagine what those who don't know God do when they go through tough times.” Well, I think we've been seeing what they do. There is a lot of anger and stress out there. Without God, people have no hope.

As I shared in a Facebook post this week, if you know this loving God, share your story of God's love with others. Especially to those whom you feel may not know Him. They need Him. Will they reject what you say? Maybe. But you may be the one light in this very dark world that someone sees. Show God's love through your actions. Love others. And as we're encouraged to hold onto the hand of God, reach your hand out to someone who needs it. You may come across someone this week who needs some help, and they'll hold onto your hand, just as you are reaching up and holding onto God's hand. And in the process, share your story - over and over. Our world, the world created by our Lord Jesus Christ, needs you!

In a few minutes an invitation will be given to come to the altar to receive Him. To come into his presence and receive the bread and wine of His communion. He's holding his hand out to you. Come. Receive Him, as He receives you.

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