

Proper 14C  
Pentecost 11

August 8, 2010  
St. Andrew's

Isaiah 1.1, 10-20  
Ps 50.1-8, 23-24  
Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16  
Luke 12.32-40

I don't know if there really is such a thing as "writer's block" or not, but if there is, I've had it. After writing and preaching a sermon at my home church in Montana last Sunday, and preparing ones for both a funeral and a wedding yesterday, when it came to a Sunday sermon for today, absolutely nothing was coming. Except Sunday morning. In a matter of hours...

And I hear myself saying, "Have faith; something always comes." Faith is a tricky word, because we think we know what it means, but when we try to define it, nothing articulate comes forth. Well, see what happens when you try to use it in a sentence: I have faith in my doctor. My faith has never failed me. Keep the faith. I am faithful to my spouse. How do people survive tragedy without faith? Is "faith" always with respect to God? Well, no, but today it will be!

Thankfully, the author of the letter to the Hebrews has given us one of the most frequently quoted verses in scripture: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* That's pretty much how I felt about my sermon not so many hours ago... ☺

John Shelley writes that this letter, which is probably actually a sermon, was written to a Christian community who had likely been subjected to prison and plunder of possessions, and most had experienced hostility, ridicule, and shame, simply because following Jesus, a crucified savior, set them at odds with the surrounding culture. This author approaches his audience through the experiences of their own faith, and the faith of their ancestors. He now reminds them that what they hope for is intimately connected to their experience of faith and that they should not expect their faith to be supported by the surrounding culture, but be assured that God will commend their faithfulness.

In a sermon, Kate Huey wonders if faith is so hard to define that it is easier or better to use examples than to write a lot of theoretical things about it. Faith is less based on theology and doctrine and intellectual assent than in the experiences of real people in a real relationship with God that can help us get at the meaning of faith, not as a precise or scholarly definition.

We get example after example of people who have trusted in the unfolding of God's plan and God's goodness, even when the end could not be seen: Abel, Noah, Abraham, Jacob and Moses; these and many more in the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews. None of these ancestors received fully the promise that had been offered. They remained strangers and pilgrims in a foreign land, dying in faith without seeing the promise fulfilled. I wonder what they would think of the dictionary.com definition of faith: *"strong or unshakeable belief in something, esp. without proof or evidence or is not based on reason."*

In his book *Secrets in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner writes: “By faith, we understand, if we are to understand it at all, that the madness and lostness we see all around us and within us are not the last truth about the world . . . . Faith is the eye of the heart, and by faith we see deep down beneath the face of things; by faith we struggle against all odds to be able to see. . . .” Deep down we all long for what we cannot see but what we know awaits us.

At Bob Phillips’ burial service yesterday, we are reminded that the promises of God are received in faith. At the time of death, of passage from this life to the life-to-come, we trust more than ever that God’s promises are true and that we will see them fulfilled in the fullness of time. It is here we see glimpses of the New Jerusalem, shining and beautiful and pray for the courage and will to continue in faith toward that heavenly city where we will see that all God’s promises are trustworthy and true.

Buechner continues: “Faith is different from theology because theology is reasoned, systematic, and orderly, whereas faith is disorderly, intermittent, and full of surprises. Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a position on than a movement toward, less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting.”

Can there be a homesickness for God? A longing and yearning for something we have glimpsed and can almost grasp? A view of the spiritual home to which we are being called?

After Robert’s funeral yesterday I went out to Lake Crescent to officiate at a wedding. Another deep transitional time, shot through with faith. Faith in another person that the promises being made are true; faith in a love which is being professed and covenanted; faith in God’s provision of what they will need in their lives together and their relationship with the Lord. Faith as their willingness and resolve to trust the goodness of God and all of creation; and to stumble along together into God’s purpose for their lives.

Faith, like love, is not a left-brained activity. We may not be able to precisely define it but we know its truth because we feel its presence. There may have been a time when we tried to equate faith with some sort of intellectual assent to the questions in the catechism at the back of the Prayer Book or memorizing Sunday School questions. But we know that rings hollow, because something like faith cannot be intellectualized, it must be lived and experienced both individually and with a community of ancestors.

A life of faith, trusting in promises made and things unseen, comes with the readiness of which Jesus speaks and turns on what he said about our treasure and our heart. If there is faith, our overall concern will be how we live in the meantime, in this liminal space in the coming kingdom. What will be our demeanor, our ethic, the condition of our hearts? Knowing how to prepare for the Son of Man’s coming is more a matter of faith than knowing the date of his arrival. In faith, we are called to be ready all the time, not only for the end, but for whatever each moment brings and whenever and however we are called to be people of faith. Every morning, wake up and decide to live the life God has given you right now. Don’t put off living faith you are meant to live.

Our reading from Luke began with “Do not be afraid.” Believe in the promises of God, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. We may have only glimpsed the

promised land, but it is a PROMISED land, and we believe through faith that Jesus is leading and guiding us there.

Gail Wheatley+