

SERMON, ST JOHN'S PENTECOST 9

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It seems like an amazing serendipity that the theme of my last Sunday with you (at least, as Interim Priest!) should be Faith. You have been (and always will be) an extraordinary inspiration for me – indeed, my own Faith has grown immeasurably because of you. I’ve said this before, but never in all my 44 years of ordained ministry have I been so consistently fed with the love of God than I have by you here at St. John’s. I feel stronger as a Christian and truly inspired to begin the next segment of my life’s journey because of you.

What strikes me as the most important thing to learn about Faith is that it is not Belief, the intellectual assent to certain ideas about God or invisible spirits. If we had to rely on belief in the journey of Faith, not many of us would get terribly far! In fact, I would suggest that **unbelief** can be as essential to a true understanding of Faith as belief. The Jewish people are very wise in holding up Jacob wrestling with the Angel as a fundamental symbol of faith in God, for faith at its core is not the blind acceptance of truth, but a struggle. Jacob wrestles through the night with this strange being, who turns out to be God, at the ford of the River Jabbok. When the man sees that he can’t prevail against Jacob, he hits his hip and puts it out of joint, thus wounding him. But Jacob won’t let the man go until he blesses him, giving him the new name, Israel, which means “the one who struggles with God,” yet survives! For this reason, the Jewish people have never feared questioning and contesting with God, and nor must we cease questioning. Though we may be wounded (and who isn’t?) we won’t let go of God, even though there are times when we don’t really even believe in him! I love the line of St. Theresa of Avila: “O God, I don’t love thee, O God, I don’t want to love thee, but O God, I want to want to love thee.” The truth is, that in the final analysis, though we don’t always love God, or even believe he exists at all, this is the Love that will never let us go. I often think of myself as an errant and kolohe kitten, dragged back to the litter like a mother cat grabbing that kitten by the scruff of the neck! So many times in my 44 years of ordained ministry, I have felt like running away, doing something else (even becoming a lawyer or going to business school!). But every time I’ve tried to dodge God, he comes after me and brings me home. Sometimes I’m reminded of that fierce little Japanese boy, recently arrived in America, who pounded me in dodge ball on the playground of Franklin Avenue Elementary School in Los Angeles when I was in the third grade. No matter how much I dodged, Toshi Watanabe always nailed me and I can still feel the sting of that ball on the back of my thigh. That’s God!

The story of Abraham called by God and leaving his home in Ur of the Chaldees to journey to an unknown land is the archetype of faith understood as both a journey and a pilgrimage. But truthfully, much of the time we go in the opposite direction from the Promised Land, don’t we? The Land of Milk and Honey sometimes seems just too bland for our tastes, just not exciting enough, or maybe we just don’t feel worthy of it, or even that it simply doesn’t exist at all. We’d rather journey instead to Babylon, a land of dazzling distractions, tinsel town, a spiritual Las Vegas, bright and shiny, but arid and full of emptiness. Sometimes we don’t embark on a journey at all, preferring to stay put where it’s safe and easy, where we don’t have to think

about anything larger than ourselves, or a destination other than where we already are. But the truth is that when our eyes are opened to see **who** we really are and to **whom** we really belong, we long to know that our true home is in the heart of God. We become awakened to the truth that both our destination and our destiny is the Promised Land of God's perfect Love. We are, as CS Lewis put it, "surprised by Joy." This is the journey of Faith.

This week, on August 3, we celebrated the Feast of the Myrrhbearers, the three women, Joanna, Salome and Mary Magdalene, who brought spices to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus according to Jewish law. These women, we are told, had followed and supported Jesus throughout his ministry and, even now they show up for him. It was dangerous to demonstrate fidelity to this condemned man and their grief was unbearable, but still they showed up and encountered the angel and the empty tomb in the dawn light of that first Easter day. In their darkness, despair and undeniable lack of belief in Jesus' promise that he would rise from the dead, they still showed up to do the right thing for their dead Lord. They, too, are surprised by Joy and are the first witnesses of the Resurrection. And so, Faith is about just showing up, not necessarily expecting a miracle (as has often tritely been put on car bumper stickers), but just being there for God and those we love, even if we don't always feel it. We may show up and find Joy, enlightenment, hope and meaning – or nothing at all. Sometimes the tomb remains full of the bones of the dead and sometimes it is empty and light shines on our darkness and despair. Often, our showing up brings joy to others, even if we don't know or feel it ourselves. And here, I can't help but share with you my own joy, even when I was down, this past year at St John's. Our own "Myrrhbearers," Gloria, Amy and Sarah have greeted me with warmth, humor and love at the entrance of this church almost every Sunday this past year. Their "showing up" in this place is a beautiful sign of how this parish is a beacon of light on the slopes of this mountain and an apt metaphor for faith, for they have shown me what it's all about and have inspired me to continue steadfastly on the journey to the Promised Land.

Faith is, above all, a relationship, a love affair, and we all know what that means! Love affairs can be full of joy, light, warmth, peace and contentment. They can also mean fire, jealousy, rage, anguish, emptiness and despair. But you don't lightly cast off a relationship with one you really love, whether friend, lover, parent, child, or sibling when times get tough unless you are really hard of heart. You hang in there, as painful as it can be, and continue to show up for the one you love. And so it is true with faith in God – 90% of it is showing up, continuing on the journey, persisting in the practice of your faith even (and perhaps especially) when you don't feel it or are angry or frustrated with God. I believe, in fact, that God loves us so much that he **expects** us to rage against him when we see the injustice, pain and cruelty in this world. How can he create so much darkness and despair, and why??? But there **is** joy and goodness and beauty and love, too. Abraham and Sarah were in despair at being left childless, but God takes Abraham out to look at the stars of the bright heavens: this is his destiny! And it is ours, too, if we hang in there and continue to show up on the journey of faith.

The beauty of our Christian faith is that we are not in this alone, for we share this journey with a great cloud of witnesses, with all who have gone before us on this way, all those who will follow us, and most importantly those with whom we share the path here and now. There is no such thing as a **personal** Christian faith because it is entirely communal, entirely shared with the great Communion of Saints. The profoundest Resurrection appearance to me is that of the

disciples on the Road to Emmaus, who despair at the death of Jesus, encounter him without recognizing him on the road, then see him in the Breaking of the Bread. Jesus is thus risen in community, he is present in our sharing the pilgrim way together, and the Eucharist is the sign of his presence in ourselves and in one another until the end of time. Because here he is truly present to us in the breaking of the bread, we are present to him and to one another. And his presence to us releases and empowers us to go forth and be his presence to the entire world. As such, faith is, indeed, as Hebrews puts it “the assurance of things hoped for” because when it is real, it’s not believing the unbelievable, but living out in our lives the true miracle of self-giving love revealed to us in Jesus. It is “the conviction of things not seen,” not because we hold onto fantasies of invisible spirits, but precisely because we see his face radiantly in the faces of our sisters and brothers.