

## HAVE FAITH AND BE READY

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If I polled the congregation on the meaning of “faith,” I wonder how many different responses I would get. Probably just about as many as there are people in this room. And a few of those answers might include some common misconceptions about faith: that faith is believing in something without evidence, that faith is a matter of mental or intellectual assent, that faith is something you can achieve if you just try hard enough. If that is how you think about faith, you are not only setting yourself up for failure and disappointment but also missing out on the full meaning and power of what it means to be a faithful person.

The book of Hebrews tells the story of Israelite and Jewish history, but does so for what was probably a gentile or mixed audience in Rome. This story of the history of God’s people emphasizes faith as their guiding characteristic. This word, *pistis* in Greek, does mean “faith” as it is usually translated, but includes meanings like “faithfulness” and “fidelity.” In Greek mythology, Pistis was the personification of good faith, trust, and reliability, and the word denotes something solid that can develop between people—a relationship. The faith we hear about in Hebrews this morning is something that’s active and evolving and relational.

“Faith is the assurance of things longed for; the conviction of things not seen.” We all know what it is like to hope and long for something, to yearn for something and in faith ask God for it. I expect we also know that sometimes these prayers are answered, and sometimes we are left waiting empty-handed, or the answer is not what we were expecting. Sometimes it feels like God is wrong, or inconsiderate, or even absent.

This is where faith comes in. Not in a trite, whistling-in-the-dark sort of way, like a “Hang in there!” cat poster, but as a confidence that God knows what we are yearning for and has our best interests at heart. I’m not sure how familiar you are with the story of Abraham and Sarah, the story that’s re-told in the Hebrews passage, but God asked them to do a lot of things that must have sounded pretty crazy, including leaving their home and living as nomads.

And, we’re told, “They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.” Not the place they came from, but a “better country,” the city that God has prepared for them. Abraham and Sarah are on a journey, a journey from their earthly home to their home with God. The only way to survive this journey, this time spent in the wandering tension between two places that feel like home, is with the confidence that God wants every good thing for them.

This Hebrews passage seems to point to a people uprooted, those who know what it is to feel a longing for home. And it also points to a new common identity in their shared relationship with—and faithfulness to—God.

This is the Christian identity: understanding that we are in relationship with a God who wants what is best for us; that our inheritance is God's very own kingdom. And we are called to act out of this identity. Being a Christian is about living with the confidence that we are beloved children of God.

At the 11:00 service this Sunday, we celebrated four baptisms. In The Episcopal Church, we understand Baptism to be full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body, the Church. In the words of our catechism, "Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God." This is why we baptize infants as well as adults, so that children too "can share citizenship in the Covenant, membership in Christ, and redemption by God."

During the baptismal rite the members of the congregation promise to do all they can to support the candidates for baptism in their life in Christ, and join with the candidates by renewing their baptismal covenant. This is a statement of faith and a statement of identity. We live in this world as strangers in a strange land, but we can find a home in our identity in Jesus, and, when it is at its best, in the church.

A life of faith is not an easy life, but fortunately it is not a life we have to live alone. We have the community of the Church, the community that affirms its faith with us. And we have Jesus, who tells us in today's Gospel reading, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

There is so much to fear: terrorism; war; the economy; global warming; unemployment, hunger, poverty, homelessness; disease and death. Jesus' words are not an assurance that we will go through life untouched by these things. Rather, Jesus is reminding us that the fears of earthly life do not need to be the defining factors of our lives.

This is true in the face of real, mortal fear, but it is at least as true in the face of the anxieties of daily living, which are what most of us probably deal with on a day-to-day basis. This anxiety over basic necessities is an act of forgetting God's role as our provider, forgetting that we serve a God who attends to sparrows, ravens, and lilies, a God whose concern for humankind extends to the very hairs on our heads, a God whose desire is to give us the treasure of heaven.

This "kingdom" that God desires to give us refers to God's active reign over heaven, brought down to earth through Jesus' ministry. As children of God, we are heirs of and active participants in this kingdom, something that completely transforms our identity and activity. Our ultimate concern in life is this eternal kingdom, making the things of our earthly life transitory. An orientation toward eternity allows us to confidently and boldly use our possessions and our time to enact the values and agenda of God's kingdom in the present as we anticipate its ultimate coming in the future.

Jesus calls us to this kingdom-sighted way of living, to seeing the whole of life as an abundant gift from a generous God—a gift that can be given away with abandon and without fear. Jesus calls us to open hands, not closed fists.

This actually reminds me of a concept in Franklin Covey's classic book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: the idea of a "scarcity mentality" versus an "abundance mentality." He writes:

*Most people are deeply scripted in what I call the Scarcity Mentality. They see life as having only so much, as though there were only one pie out there. And if someone were to get a big piece of the pie, it would mean less for everybody else.*

*The Scarcity Mentality is the zero-sum paradigm of life. People with a Scarcity Mentality have a very difficult time sharing recognition and credit, power or profit – even with those who help in the production. They also have a very hard time being genuinely happy for the success of other people.*

*The Abundance Mentality, on the other hand, flows out of a deep inner sense of personal worth and security. It is the paradigm that there is plenty out there and enough to spare for everybody. It results in sharing of prestige, of recognition, of profits, of decision making. It opens possibilities, options, alternatives, and creativity.*

Franklin Covey's writing is done through the lens of the business world, but it is easily translatable to other aspects of life, including our life as Christians. It's so easy to operate out of a position of scarcity, to believe that it is giving instead of taking that will leave us desolate and desperate. But the truth is, in God we already have everything we need, and with the faith that God wants the best for us, we can live fearlessly with open hands.

We can be ready for Jesus. The latter part of this passage has an apocalyptic feel to it, which can sound, at first, counter to Jesus' command not to be afraid. But the readiness—the constant vigilance—that Jesus calls for is not an on-edge alertness born of fear for the master's return or the thief's break-in. This high degree of nervous anticipation is neither sustainable nor productive. Think of those whose profession demands creativity: a composer or author working on a new piece, or a scientist or mathematician working on a problem. So often we hear about a breakthrough coming not through unending persistence, but when they step away from the work to take a break.

Instead of an anxious call to paranoia, this readiness is a joyful anticipation that motivates action. It is a call to be on the lookout for Jesus in your life, to see the places where God might come to you in an act of kindness or generosity, in the face of a friend or stranger.

This awareness is both a mindset and a skill that can be cultivated. Think again of the composer, author, scientist, and mathematician. Their breakthroughs don't just materialize out of thin air. They are possible because of all the work and care that was put in over time. Disciplined awareness must be carefully nurtured over time, and with this fertile ground for growth, fresh insight can come at some unexpected moment, like the thief in the night.

This is what we promise to do when we have a baptism in the church: to help new members of our community to nurture awareness, to look for God in the world. To live in a faithful way that furthers the Kingdom of God.

Faith is this active living in awareness beyond fear. It is trusting that God is working out what is best for us, and that our lives are in God's hands. The blessings offered in the Gospel passage are known most fully by those who are no longer afraid of potential danger, darkness, and death, who live not on the brink of disaster but on the brink of blessing.

Saint Clare, one of the first followers of Saint Francis of Assisi, founded the Order of Poor Ladies (today the Order of Saint Clare, commonly referred to as the Poor Clares), a monastic religious order for women in the Franciscan tradition. She wrote their Rule of Life, the first set of monastic guidelines known to have been written by a woman.

She is credited with writing words of blessing that, with a slight pronoun alteration, I think makes an excellent prayer for us all:

*Let us live without fear: our Creator has made us holy, has always protected us, and loves us as a mother. Let us go in peace to follow the good road and may God's blessing be with us always. Amen.*