

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost ~Year C
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
August 12, 2007

"Three Keys to Faith"

Lessons for the Day

- ✘ Genesis 15:1-6
- ✘ Psalm 33
- ✘ Hebrews 11:1-3 (4-7) 8-16
- ✘ Luke 12:32-40

Homily

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator, Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains and sanctifies us, empowering us to love and to serve both God and Christ. Let us be silent for a moment in their presence -- as we seek to be present to them.

Amen.

The lessons appointed for today have a **single deep and broad theme, and that theme is "Faith"**. **Faith is kind of a churchy word** when you think about it. It's much more churchy, for instance, than "Love" which has been hijacked by our culture to the point that it can mean anything from unbridled lust to a deep affection for waffle cones of cappuccino crunch ice cream -- something, by the way, that I do indeed love.

But what of this faith thing? What does it mean to have faith? What do we make of it? And how do we go about participating -- with God -- in the growth and nurturance of our own lives of faith?"

In the **Genesis text** we pick up the **story of Abram**, who first came onto the scene at the end of Chapter 11. Abram has already thrown in with God in a big way -- at the age of seventy-five, he left the land of his birth on a long journey. And now we hear God say to him:

"Do not be afraid. I am your shield; your reward will be very great . . . no one but your own issue shall be your heir . . . Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendents be." And Abram believed the Lord . . . "

Genesis 15:1-6 (selected) (NRSV)

In the **lesson from Luke** we hear the familiar passage about being watchful slaves; the text is prefaced by a quick treatise on God's will for us and the response we are called -- in faith -- to make to God's amazing love. Hear again Jesus' words in Luke 12:32 and the following verses:

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Finally, in the **lesson from Hebrews** we get a great definition of faith, and powerful examples of faith in action from the saints of the Old Testament. The definition of faith is a simple -- and classic -- one:

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. "

Hebrews 11:1 (NRSV)

The list of Saints in Hebrews is long, too, and the stories are moving: Abel and Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses.

So what do we make of all this? Surely faith is a key tenet of our religious tradition, but **so what?** If **you** decided -- if **I** decided -- if **we all** decided here and now to live a life of deep faith, what might that look like?

There are **three simple things we can do** to live a life of faith -- and **they are all things we can begin doing here, now**, in response to the amazing love of God in Christ. These three things are:

- 1) **Fear Not**
- 2) **See and Believe**
- 3) **Respond**

Fear not! The **angels said it to the shepherds** on the Galilean hillside the night Jesus was born -- in fact angels say it almost every time they show up in the Bible. **God said it to Abram** in our text from Genesis. **Jesus said it to the disciples** in our passage from Luke. **Fear not!**

This is not polite Episcopal language, but I must tell you that **fear is the work of the Devil, the great deceiver, the liar** who begs us to fall back on our own devices and foreswear our faith in God. **Fear is a solvent for faith** -- whatever faith we have (whether it is large enough to move mountains or as small as a mustard seed) will dissolve when awash in a sea of fear.

I am not **saying there is nothing to fear in life**, for that, too is a lie. Some people mean us harm. Those we love will sicken and die. We, too, will weaken and meet a more-or-less gentle end. Life is -- or **can be** -- difficult. But **none of these difficulties is beyond the reach of our compassionate and loving God** -- the same God whose good pleasure it is to give us the kingdom. Our African-American brothers and sisters were right when they sang, **"He's got the whole world in his hands."** Nothing is beyond the reach of our loving and redemptive God. So **fear not -- that is the beginning of faith.**

See and believe. We often hear of people having "blind faith" and -- at least for my money -- that is alternate language for "just plain stupid". **God does not call us to have blind faith. God calls us to see and to believe.**

Let's take our friend Abram, from the Old Testament lesson for today. Abram is probably best known to us as Abraham, the father of Isaac; the patriarch who -- in faithful obedience to God -- packed up his only son and

prepared to sacrifice him to God. I have often thought, "What kind of loony-toon would do that?" But **I wasn't seeing the world through Abram's eyes. Abram had seen. And Abram believed.**

By the time Abram was called upon to sacrifice his son, he had been led by God (and lived) on a long sojourn from his homeland through the land of Canaan to Egypt. He had left Egypt and made his way through the Negev.

He had had **multiple encounters with God -- in each of which God had promised to make Abram the father of a great nation.**

Abram had seen Sarah bear a child as promised by God -- even after both of them laughed at God for making such a preposterous promise. **Abram had seen. And he believed. His heart sustained him when his reason failed him -- and that's another definition of faith.**

The second step in building a life of faith is to see and believe. We have all seen things that help us to believe, but they are so common we discount them. **Jesus turned water into wine** at the wedding in Cana, and **we count that a miracle. God is busy turning water into wine every day** in wineries across the world -- and the miracle is so common and in such slow motion that **we ascribe it to natural processes** and not to an act of God. Who, after all, is the author of natural processes?

I am looking out right now at an entire congregation of miracles. The odds of your being here -- *of your being born at all* -- are infinitesimally small. Had your mother conceived one month sooner -- or one month later -- you would not be here at all.

But you are here. You get to breathe crisp fall air and stare at bright blue skies and watch snowflakes drift down on quiet winter days. **You, yourself, are a flesh and blood miracle. See and Believe.**

Respond. The faith of which we have been speaking is nurtured by -- and grows in light of -- response. And **response is the third of the three-part model that builds our lives of faith.**

For the last week, dozens of members of Saint Paul's have been conducting Vacation Bible School, painting and living the life of faith at El Buen Pastor (The Good Shepherd) in **Costa Rica.** Now ***that's responding.***

Tomorrow, August 13, at 9AM, Saint Paul's **Vacation Bible School** will begin with a staff of dozens of committed and faithful volunteers. The children will laugh and sing and play and have a wonderful time learning about Jesus -- all because **people of faith were willing to respond.**

Next Thursday, August 16th, at 5PM, Shinika Austin and her son will move into their new home. This is not just any home -- this is a **Habitat House -- built by Saint Paul's members who have responded to God's call to love and to serve others.** This, too, is responding.

Perhaps none of these is a way you can respond, and that's okay, too. I am reminded of the old story about a rabbi meeting to counsel with a member of his synagogue. The believer was plagued with worry because he had not served God in the grand way of some of the great patriarchs of the faith. The rabbi spoke gently to the man,

assuring him: "When you meet God, God will not ask why you were not Moses. **God will ask why you were not yourself!**"

There are **ways that only you can respond -- gifts that only you have** -- because God graced you with them at the moment of your birth. **Take those gifts. Respond.**

I had a letter last month from an old and dear friend. She is married to another dear friend and they have a lovely family -- two boys in their early teens. **My friend is once again pregnant -- this time as a surrogate mother** for a young couple who lost their only chance at parenthood to a crushing stillbirth in the fifth month of the pregnancy.

My friend is 49. The child will be born one month to the day before her fiftieth birthday. Every day her husband gives her shots to help sustain the pregnancy to full term. **There are clearly some things to fear** in this wild and faithful journey. But my friend has faith. My friend has seen God's faithfulness over and over again. My friend believes. And she has responded with an emphatic and faithful "yes" to God's call on her life in this grand and loving gesture.

In one of her best-known poems, the poet Mary Oliver asks, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

My counsel -- to you, to Mary Oliver, and to myself regarding our *"one wild and precious life"* is just this:

- 1) Fear Not**
- 2) See and Believe**
- 3) Respond**

AMEN.