

Trusting an unknown future

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 11 August, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 9 C

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16; Luke 12: 32-40; Song: “*Be Still*” by The Fray

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXF2irNdJgQ>

Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know I am.

Faith is a word with many meanings. For many people, secular and religious, it refers to belief in things that we cannot see or prove. The passage from the letter to the Hebrews begins with the familiar words that might seem to reinforce that definition: “*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.*”

But in this assurance and conviction I’m not referring to intellectual assent.

Faith doesn't mean agreement with a set of propositions; it means something more like “trust” or “allegiance.” It's not a synonym for “belief”. It's about relationship.

Conservative Christianity has, however, reduced faith to a set of beliefs, primarily about Jesus’ death that, when assented to, guarantee a pass into heaven. It tells us not to be concerned about the world in which we find ourselves. Not to be concerned about the earth in climate crisis; about the refugees who still languish on Manus and Nauru; about the world beset by poverty and violence; societies riven by conflicting views and values.

The essence of faith, as defined in today’s passage from the letter to the Hebrews, is still about convictions of things not seen – but understood in a different way. Because, if we can see or know indisputable evidence with our eyes, if we can predict outcomes with certainty, then faith is superfluous. We are told, in the letter to the Hebrews, that Abraham and Sarah were exemplars of their faith when they “*set out on a journey, not knowing where they were going.*”

Jesus seems much less concerned with the unknown future than with the question of what we are supposed to be doing in the meantime. Today’s gospel reading offers two images in answer to that question: like servants, we are to keep the lamps lit because the householder may return at any time. And like the owner of a house, since we cannot know at what hour a thief might come, we are to stay prepared. Our task is not to worry about the morrow, but to be about the daily work of faithfulness.

Faith is often confused with results – “*If only we have enough faith, everything will turn out alright.*” And, then, when it doesn't, we redefine things so that even the bad things that happen to us are somehow part of some larger plan that we will now have faith in.

In Hebrews, faith is not something to be accomplished or justified. Here faith stands and falls in the presence of a distant hope, a far-off welcoming: a vision of the shalom of God.

Faith is part of seeking, not its end. Faith is a way of living. And Luke's gospel tells us simply, and shockingly, how to live a life of faith. Don't be afraid to sell your possessions and give the proceeds away.

We can preach on this and we can hear this, knowing how hard and almost unimaginable such an act might be.

The direction to live without an attachment to things, to arrive at a place of peace is one that we are capable of subverting in a number of different ways. We can continue to be afraid. We can fail to live generously because of the threat of terrorism, or climate change, the fear that we might not have enough money for a secure future, or the fear of failure measured against the standards of a materialist society. In Luke's Gospel, possession is a code word for security. Our treasure becomes the goal of life. Fear keeps us tied to the treasures that we have, away from greater possibilities.

The gospel reading reminds us that evidence of a life of faith shows up in the giving process - giving time, giving energy, giving resources, giving and giving. This is the way to be ready and watchful - dismissing the possessions that would claim our attention. We are limited in what we can attend to at any point. To attend to possessions or security, the Gospel tells us, is to not attend to that which is calling us to a life of faith without fear.

Jesus commends a way of living in expectation that frees us from the need to acquire and hoard for the morrow. He does also, in the Lord's Prayer that we read last week, expect that there will be enough daily bread for all. He asks us to be free of the prisons that create our fear. The prisons that our fears create.

Jesus says, in the midst of this text, "*Fear not*" when everything is inviting us to be fearful. Nothing seems secure. Politically, and sometimes personally, everything seems like it is falling apart. How can we live a life without fear when our world is broken by community and family violence, by poverty and inequality, by racism and war?

I remember reading somewhere that animals, including humans, are born with only two fears, fear of loud noises and fear of falling. Every other fear that we have is learned from somebody else. Fear of failure or success. Fear of open spaces or of the dark. Fear of terrorists, fear of accidents. Fear of people who are different, fear of other faith traditions. Fear of being poor, fear of being marginalized. Fear of hell, fear of judgement. All of these are learned. We are born with none of these fears and we don't get them from God whose love overcomes fear.

Much of religion has taught people to fear God, but this is a misunderstanding. The fear of God in the Bible refers to awe. But most religion does not want us to know the difference between fear that cripples, and awe that empowers.

To his friends and to us, Jesus says, "*Fear not.*"

Jesus recognizes that, even in spite of their limited understanding, God was calling his followers to fuller life. They have been included in the mystery of transformation. They are not the majority, they are not to be judged by the size of their congregations. They are the little flock. Wealth is not a consideration, Status is not a measure. What matters is their willingness to travel the road with him. He invites them into a life shaped in response to God's love and care.

This way of being enables us to touch and know the hope of Jesus that can move us to live into a different future, for ourselves and for others, even when all the evidence seems to point to hopelessness.

Before she died, far too young, millennial Christian writer, Rachel Held Evans, wrote: *“To put one’s hope in Jesus, then, is to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary Jesus’ way of peace, justice, mercy and compassion will ultimately prevail over the empire’s ways of violence, exploitation, oppression and fear. Christians believe the resurrection of Jesus from the dead gives shape to these wild hopes. Even death at the hand of Rome could not keep him down.”*ⁱ

This is what it means to say that faith is *“the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.”*

Faith is a way of living into the possibilities of shalom. And in the context of the Jewish and Christian traditions, we do not stand alone in the story of faith. Abraham and Sarah lived into their unknown future. The church to which letter to the Hebrews was written was a church that had, apparently, lost its enthusiasm. The unknown writer wanted those who read this letter to hear once again the stories of their faith, to be renewed in their own faith.

Faith does not depend on things going to plan. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that: *faith sees best in the dark. Faith is a willing but struggling trust in the purposes of God.* Faith is trust in the purposes of God. Faith depends on attention to the revelation of the sacred, encouraging our seeking questions, so that the process of questioning speaks not only to our heads, but to our hearts and to the living of our lives.

The heart of faith is relationship: with God, with the sacred, with one another, and with the earth. To claim one has faith is to claim relationship with all that is. Faith is an action of the heart not the head. Apparently Martin Luther, when asked about the source of faith, said that *‘that could be located just below the left nipple!’* Faith grows from the heart.

This is entirely unlike the wisdom of the world. Economic realities are revered so highly as the solution to so many of life’s challenges, that talk of selling possessions and giving massively to the poor is unthinkable for us. But this is indeed the radical nature of the gospel.

Progressive Christians find it hard to make sense of biblical literature that speaks of the return of Christ. But as Rachel Held Evans pointed out, biblical prophecy is not about predicting the future. Rather it tells the stories of resistance in order to inspire our resistance – to the powers of empire, to the powers of all that is broken in our world.

The Christian vision of life challenges trust in the accumulation of wealth, the ever-widening gap between the elite and the growing underclass; the cruelty that would limit the Newstart payments of people who are unemployed to levels that are unliveable. It challenges that view of life that fails to reflect on what the Divine Presence in the midst of life really means.

Glimpsing a larger vision can free us to live toward the kin-dom of God. If we can let go of grasping for security, if we can be generous, we will be able to receive Jesus' words, *“Do not be afraid.”*

Do not be afraid? So easy to say, but hard to do when your heart is not in it, when your heart is torn between trusting God - trusting these crazy things that Jesus says really will change our world - and trusting what our culture says about who is really secure and how they got that way. The solution Jesus advocates is stepping forward in faith, and trusting that our hearts will indeed follow.

The opposite of the prosperity gospel, this is the identity gospel. We take that step that the world says is foolishness, and we experience, as a result of that trust, not only deeper intimacy with God, but also real love in community. Trust begets trust; generosity births generosity.

That's why, I think, that the compilers of the lectionary chose to have us read the Letter to the Hebrews alongside today's Gospel, so that we too could recall the faith of Abraham and Sarah.

You know that you've got faith when, even if your heart pounds as you do it, even though you exist still with fear, you do take the next step forward into the desert, asserting with Sarah and Abraham: *My journey will birth a people, and we will have a home.* Your heart will follow your feet, and you will become more fully what the Sacred already knows to be your true identity.

All of those messages we grew up with and which surround us every day, create such a clamour that it takes a lot of intentional seeking to hear beyond them.

So pause,

breathe,

and listen

to what your heart of hearts,

that God-shaped space within you is longing for -

longing wholeheartedly for peace, and love, and joy, and most of all for hope.

This word is inviting us to put our treasure here.

Trust.

Do not be afraid.

Wrap yourself in words of promise and presence:

*"Be still and know that I'm with you.
Be still and know I am."*

ⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/07/12/the-bible-is-literature-for-the-resistance/?noredirect=on>