

How Can We Have Faith?

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Good morning. Good morning! When I look at my four separate schedules each week: one for classes, one for work, one for chaplaincy training, and one for home/errands/and chores, I wonder how it is all going to get done. I often don't see how it can all work out. In today's reading from Genesis Abram cannot see how it is all going to work out either. Abram doubts the future. Abram is too busy in the activities of his everyday life to wait on God's blessing or maybe too overwhelmed by life's circumstances to allow God's unfolding plan. God says, "Abram, I will do it." And Scripture says that somehow Abram believes.

The God of Psalm 43 today seems impossibly distant. Certainly not the God who spoke to Abram face to face. This God looks down from Heaven. The Lord sits firmly enthroned and watches—meaning the Watchful One isn't getting off their behind. Even though the Creator fashioned our hearts, it seems like God is content to watch us work instead of getting their hands dirty. The psalmist says God's eye is upon those who fear Him, but we still aren't sure about this God of ours. The psalmist insists that we "place our hope" in God. How can we? How can I?

Our prayer lives can so often look like we are struggling and straining to drag God down into our mess. Looks like we are putting God into the cattle shoot of our busyness and directing the Loving One to where they need to go next. Our prayers might look like we are running with the bulls at Pamplona where we are just barely ahead of all those hooves and horns, only the hooves and horns are our life, and we are asking the Holy One for just a bit more speed. I've been there. Maybe you too?

In the reading from Hebrews today, Paul begins our reading by saying that faith is NOT based in evidence or fact. Not based on the assurance of the outcomes of our current problems and worries. That means faith is not based on any power we have or hope to have in steering things in the right direction. Let me say this again. Our faith is not based on any power we have or hope to have in steering things in the right direction. Our faith isn't up to us or our efforts. Abram's faith didn't have anything to do with

the circumstances of his life in the moment. The circumstances of his life said nothing was happening, that God might have dropped the ball.

We hardly ever have faith in our own efforts when we are flailing around in the water, about to drown. Rather, we have faith in the lifeguard we see swimming toward us. We have faith in the lifeguard's training and skill. We don't have faith in the water. We certainly don't have faith in our own skills and swimming abilities as we begin to go under. We don't have faith that "everything will turn out for the best" once the water goes up our nose. No, we are in full out panic mode then.

So too with God. It isn't that we have faith that God is all powerful and will get with our agenda to make everything turn out just the way we want. It is almost impossible to have faith that we will get through our distress, while we are in the middle of it. It's hard to recall that God has been faithful in the past when we are surrounded by our current problems or worries.

If we do have faith, we put our faith in God's character. Not in our circumstances. Instead, we have faith that the Loving One is indeed loving. We have faith that the Merciful One really might show us mercy. We aren't putting our faith in God making everyone getting their act together and fly right (as much as I suggest these sorts of things to God every morning), but we might have faith that God is God. We trust in who God is, not the certainty that God will resolve everything to our satisfaction.

This is how Abram believes. This is how the psalmist trusts. This is how we are instructed to live our lives according to Paul. To put our hopes and our faith in God—not that God will do things in ways that are obvious to us. Not putting our faith in the circumstances of our lives, but in God. Not to put our faith in that if we spell things out for God, they will get with our program. Not on our timeframe. Maybe even not in our lifetime as Paul reminds us in Hebrews 11:13, "All of these died in faith without having received the promises..." The people God had chosen. The people in the Bible God appeared face to face with, could not see God's promises fulfilled in their own lifetimes, yet they still lived, and died in their faith that God was faithful to His promises. That God would make a

way despite the circumstances. That God was Loving, and Merciful even if it would be someone else who would be the recipient of that love and mercy.

Now it could be easy for me to look at today's scriptures and think my faith had to be something like the statement, maybe you have heard other people of faith say about the Bible: God said it. I believe it. That's it!

That way of thinking might be admirable in some sense, a steely faith. A faith of absolutes. Some might call it, a faith that is impervious to the facts. If we read about the lives of the women and men in the Bible, we know these holy, larger than life people had lives just like ours. Full problems and difficulties. Full of loss and sorrow. Full of desires and dreams. Full of anger and rage. They wrestled with God, fought with God, argued with God, and sometimes told God to stuff it. When things get a little too uncomfortable with me, I often tell God to stuff it too. And that is okay. God can handle it. God is bigger than me and can handle my small opinions.

Abram got tired of waiting on God to be faithful to God's promises and took matters into his own hands. He slept with his wife's servant to have a child because God wasn't doing anything. He wrecked his peaceful home, and filled it with strife, grief, anger. Abram made daily life incredibly difficult for everyone because he didn't see how it all could work out. Abram thought he knew better than God. He then looked to God and said, "What else was I supposed to do God? You weren't doing anything!"

So often it can seem in my life that God isn't doing anything, that so much is up to me. Or that so much is happening in the world and so much is up to Christ Lutheran Church. That so much is beyond our power to change that it all seems hopeless. When I think everything is up to me, I want to be God and take control of it all. Or, when I give up, I think that God, like me, is completely powerless. Neither one of these things are true. Neither one is the faith talked about in scripture today.

When faced with difficult times in my life, I can't focus on just me. My efforts. My failures. I need other people to help me. This is one reason I

go to church. Not because I am afraid God will send me on the long curly slide to hell, but because I need other people to point God out.

When in this state, I am reminded of what Bill Wilson, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, wrote in his appendices on spiritual experience. He writes, "Most of our [spiritual] experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the 'educational variety' because they develop slowly over a period of time. Quite often friends are aware of the difference long before we are ourselves."

Did you catch that? Most often, we are unaware of the work God is doing in us, in our lives, just below the surface. Much like Abram. We need others to see our own life better than we can. We need a community to help us reflect on what God is up to. We can believe all we want, but we need others to believe with us too.

Bill W. continues, "a person finally realizes that they have undergone a profound alteration in their reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by themselves alone...they find they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify ...a Power greater than themselves. Most of us think this awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience." How simple. How profound. An awareness of God, is the very heart, is what we mean when we say spiritual experience. Not a miracle. Not a blinding white light. Not a burning bush. Not some heavenly vision. Not the stuff that is easy for us to point out. Rather, our spiritual experience comes when we have an active awareness of God in our lives. An awareness usually pointed out to us by other people.

I don't know about you, but when my life is difficult, or busy, or full of loss, it is hard for me to be aware of what God is up to. This is one reason for coming to church, for sharing my life with other members of Christ Lutheran Church. Remember what I've said in other sermons? It's not true that God doesn't give us more than we can handle by ourselves? My God is not cruel, seeing how much I can take before I break, dunking us under the water as some kind of spiritual test. My God doesn't do that, and I hope yours doesn't either.

I believe God doesn't give us—you, me, you—all together—more than we can handle. So that if you are having a hard time, the person next to you can help you through it. When someone over there is going under, it is up to us to reach out a hand to help. This is what church is about. This is what it means to be part of a community of faith. A community of faith, not a person of faith, at home, by themselves struggling to believe. Struggling not to slip entirely away. To go under. I promise you; you aren't going to drown today. We are here for you, all of us. We have you.

This is what Jesus means when he says in Luke's gospel today, "Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." We are the kingdom God was talking about. We aren't alone. We aren't meant to be. We are meant to be a community of faith, a little flock.

This is what it means when Jesus says, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit." Because sometimes some of us will be falling asleep. Therefore, some of us will watch while you rest. Because at other times someone will be too sad to show up. Then it is up to some of us to check in on one another, to visit those absent, to keep us from slipping away. Today I will get too caught up in the drama of my life to pay attention, and tomorrow it might be you. But one of us will probably be lighting a lamp today. Tomorrow someone else will remember.

We are called my brothers and sisters in Christ to be a community of faith. Not a loner of faith. Not an island of faith way off by ourselves. But a gathering of believers together, loving one another, supporting one another, guiding one another, so that we are able to live and die in a life of faith, even if God's promise is still a long way off. This is what we mean when we sometimes say in the prayers of our liturgy, "we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ." We all wait. We all hope. We do it together mutually caring for one another. A little flock, God's kin-dom here on earth.

This is why God calls us together each week. This is why Jesus feeds us each week at the table each Sunday, so we may truly be one body, one spirit in Christ. The lamps are lit. We are dressed for action, and God has come among us, but it just might take all of us to see it. Amen.