

Proper 14-C  
August 10-11, 2019  
St. John's Cathedral

When I was a young mom in Kennewick, my doorbell rang one morning, so with a baby in my arms and a toddler clinging to my leg, I answered the door to see two Jehovah's Witnesses standing on my porch. (This wasn't a big surprise. We were often a practice neighborhood for the witnesses because a neighbor was their trainer.) A woman began, "I would like to share a word about faith." And I replied, "Do you mean Hebrews 11 – **Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen?**"

Her jaw dropped. She didn't know what to say. It was the first and only time I have ever rendered a Witness speechless. After a short silence, they wished us a good day and left. I might add that at that point in my life that was one of maybe three Bible verses that I could share with confidence. But if there were ever one verse to have in your pocket, this would be a great one. I'd like to see it needle-pointed in people's parlors or written in permanent ink on the backs of our hands. (It's probably a bit long for a tattoo, but you never know.)

This is wonderfully basic stuff. Foundational stuff. This is what gets us through the day. And when it was written it was a teaching designed to help shore up a group of Jewish converts in the early church who lived every day with the possibility and the reality of persecution – of suffering for their faith. Important, foundational teaching.

It would be easy to read this and start waxing philosophically about faith in a kind of abstract way. But Hebrews doesn't leave us there. Its author jumps right to a real, human story

to make the point. The story, of course, is that of Abraham and Sarah, a bit of which we read in Genesis today. Abraham, and Sarah you recall, are some of our great spiritual ancestors. Abraham was asked by God to uproot himself and his family from their familiar place to a far-off place where God would have them go. They didn't have a clue what that would be like. They were childless, but God's promise was that they would have offspring – as many as the stars in the sky. And better yet, that God would be with them. "Do not be afraid," God says. I am your shield."

Those are very sturdy and assuring words. Words for the journey – the journey of faith. Abraham's journey with his family is a classic example of a faith story, but it is, I think, also a wonderful metaphor for living our lives. Let's face it. Life often feels like a journey to a place we've never been before. A journey that takes us from the familiar to the unfamiliar. A journey that can sometimes seem vexing or even scary. A lot of the time we don't have as much control as we would like. As much certainty and clarity as we'd like.

The late John Kavanaugh, a Jesuit, was thinking a lot about clarity when he spent a month working in Calcutta early in his ministry. One morning after Mass he met Mother Teresa, who asked him, "What can I do for you?" And he replied, "Pray for me." She asked him what he wanted her to pray for and he said, "Pray that I have clarity."

Mother Teresa's answer's answer was simply, "No." She explained that clarity was the last thing he needed to let go of. When he remarked that he had always longed for the clarity

that she seemed to have, she simply laughed. “I have never had clarity; what I’ve always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust,” she told him.

The question for us is often, How do we trust? How do we live our lives in a way that puts us in the hands of God? Sometimes that seems like a challenge.

We run into bumps in the road that are huge. Losses in our lives. Illness. Financial challenges. Any number of struggles and changes. World events and tragedies that seem incomprehensible, like the string of mass shooting that have plagued our country as recently as this past week.

Sometimes we live in a sea of unanswered questions and nagging doubts. The good news is that somehow we get through them with God’s help. With whatever scrap of faith and trust we muster, and also with the shared faith of a community like this one here at St. John’s. We get through those bumpy journeys by sharing them with others who share a common faith. Those who remind us in those times that our own faith feels pretty thin, of what God told Abraham -- that we are not alone. God is our companion and we are companions to one another.

This Hebrews passage lifts Abraham and Sarah up as role models. They are part of what we know as the great cloud of witnesses - both the ancient heroes of the faith who are celebrated in scripture and history and also our contemporary role models. Maybe you have one of those people in your life. I am in the Church because of some of them.

I grew up in a home that was mostly unchurched – a fairly typical pattern in the Pacific Northwest. We had some brief flirtations Sunday school in a couple of different traditions, but most of my childhood Sunday mornings were spent at home, often watching Rocky and

Bullwinkle on television. In high school I sometimes tagged along with my friends to the Lutheran Church, but never joined.

When I was in college in Seattle, my roommate my senior year was a friend named Susan whose family belonged to Trinity Episcopal Church in Everett. Sue had been diagnosed with a kind of cancer that is very treatable today, but was not very treatable in the 1960s. She and her family lived with that reality daily. And they lived it with an incredible hope and grace. An incredible confidence.

Once in a while I'd go home with Sue for a weekend and we attended Trinity with her family. I have to confess that I fell in love with the Episcopal Church's liturgy on those weekends in Everett. It was something that really touched my soul.

But there was something else that touched me even more deeply. It was the way Sue and her family were supported by their church family. That support was rather quiet and subtle, but very strong. No one was denying that she had a serious, possibly terminal illness. There was a strength, a resolve, a steadiness that surrounded them. A deep sense of caring. But most of all, it was a faith and trust— that were clearly shared. They were an anchor. Individually and collectively, they trusted God to accompany them through that journey, wherever it would lead. Simple as that.

When Sue died at the age of 25, they were there again, surrounding the family with love and living the resurrection faith that is our shared gift.

I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to be in that kind of a community. A community that moved with grace and calm through stormy, difficult times. A community that offered support. A community that was willing to walk along in trust. A community that moved from

trust to hope.

The journey through this year has been a challenging one in many ways for our nation, for our world. Too often we learn of another mass shooting, a tragedy of some sort, acts of terror and threats of war. Contentious issues often fill the evening news and we feel ‘on edge,’ wondering, “What next?” For many there are also personal struggles that run in the background of everyday life – deep questions and challenges. There are rarely easy answers to complex situations, but we pray for insight –for a nudge toward a next step.

Today we asked in our prayer that God would help us “think and do those things that are right.” Thinking and doing. Being moved at some point to action by our faith-filled trust in God – through our intentional listening..

That may sounds like a tall order amid the complexities with which we live daily. But it is a start, a step on the journey. Perhaps in our persistence with prayers like that, we will be led toward ways to make a difference – to face into the challenges that surround us with a spirit of reconciliation, hope and courage.

One thing I know after having shared ministry with you here over months and years. There is a great cloud of witnesses here. People we can lean on. We are people of faith. People who know that God is with us and loves us deeply. People of hope. People who live our faith daily and share it generously.

May our faith – the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen – continue to be our strength -- our roots -- our wings—as we journey on.