

August 18, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
“Faith is a Verb”
Hebrews 11



When I was a child and I complained about how hot it was in the backseat of our station wagon, my father had a standard response. I knew what he was going to say every time, yet I said it anyway, “it’s hot back here.” He answered every time as well, “not as hot as if you were crossing the prairie in a covered wagon.” I’m not sure how many prairies he crossed in a covered wagon- a few probably- maybe he was foreshadowing the days I would indeed live on ancient prairie lands. Thankfully, I do not travel in a covered wagon as we experience record heat these days.

Imagine 100+ degree days, crossing a desert in a covered wagon- no shade in sight, no convenience stores on every corner for a cool drink. Imagine having run out of water some time back and thinking you’ve about met your death. Imagine coming up to an old water pump. Maybe you remember the tale:

The following letter was found in a baking powder can wired to the handle of an old pump that offered the only hope of drinking water on a very long and seldom-used trail across Nevada’s Amargosa Desert. It read:

“This pump is all right as of June 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock, I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There’s enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one-fourth and let her soak to wet the leather Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You’ll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller. (signed) Desert Pete. P.S. Don’t go drinking the water first. Prime the pump with it and you’ll get all you can hold.” --*Keith Miller and Bruce Larson, The Edge of Adventure.*

I read over this several times. I tried to put myself into this situation. Imagine crossing the desert, hot, dry sand in your mouth. Coming up to a water well and finding a note such as this. Imagine digging up that bottle of water (sure enough, it was right where the note said it would be). Imagine holding that water in your hand with sun-cracked lips and a cotton mouth begging for relief. You read the note several times, what would you do? How hard would it be to open that water and pour it on the well, in faith, that the pump will work? Do you pour it out? Or chugalug?

Maybe, it would be helpful in making the decision if you knew something about “ole Desert Pete.” Have others gone before you and told tales of ole Desert Pete? Have stories

circulated and been confirmed by those you trust? Have you heard that ole Desert Pete is a good guy, a feller you can trust? If Pete says it, you can bet your life on it. Or have you heard that ole Desert Pete is a real prankster? A good fellow, but don't believe a word he says? Or maybe you heard that ole Desert Pete is as mean as the Devil and out for no good.

What have you heard about the One you are asked to trust your life to? What have you heard about the One you are told to have faith in? Here's what the writer of Hebrews had heard about those who had been acting on their faith in the One?

By faith, Abel offered a sacrifice

By faith, Noah built an ark

By faith, Abraham obeyed and set out

By faith, Abraham offered Isaac

By faith, Isaac blessed Jacob

By faith, Jacob gave instructions

By faith, Moses was hidden

By faith, Moses led the people

By faith, the people passed through the Red Sea

We hear the word "faith" and we often think "belief." That to have faith is to believe: to believe in God, to believe in the teachings of Christ, to believe in a certain doctrine or creed. We think "to believe" means to have a mental agreement. Some religious people would even say that to have faith means to believe – to have mental agreement-with things our brains tells us are illogical or impossible. While this is a common understanding today, The Hall of Faith in today's scripture is not about people saying, "I believe..." Each of these are examples of faith in a form of action-and change taking place because of faith.

Marcus Borg reminds us that this notion that Christian faith is primarily about belief, about head matter-is fairly recent understanding in terms of theological timeline. The Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment shaped modern Western culture to understand that faith meant, "believing the right things." He then notes, if you think about faith strictly being about hanging on to a belief, then you miss something crucial. If you think about it, 'faith as a belief is relatively impotent, relatively powerless. You can believe all the right things and still be in bondage. You can believe all the right things and still be miserable. You can believe all the right things and still be relatively unchanged. Believing a set of claims to be true has very little transforming power.'--*Borg, Marcus. The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith.*

"Faith" in the dictionary is a noun (person, place or thing), but I propose to you that "faith" in the church is a verb. It is action! In order for each of these Faith Hall of Famers to act in faith – they began by trusting. Other than a mind-set agreeing to a belief, faith is a radical trust in God that leads to action. When faith is understood as empowerment to act on trust, then faith is life transforming, potent and powerful!

The opposite of trust is anxiety or worry. The words from Luke we heard were “Do not be afraid, little flock, for God will give you the kingdom of God.” Jesus tells the people not to worry about what they will eat or wear. He said, “you of little faith, do not worry” equating faithlessness as source of worry. Do not be afraid. Faith is allowing Trust in God to guide the ACTIONS of our lives...Instead of FEAR guiding the reactions of our lives.

Let’s think about that for a minute. Our actions can be guided by our fears. Our lives can be shaped by our fear of loneliness, fears of rejection, fears of poverty, fear of failure, fear of enemies, fear of ____ (whatever) _____. Fear can be a powerful catalyst in our lives, a powerful motivator.

He was born in 1918 on a farm in Oklahoma. His mother died when he was an infant. His early days were a series of shuffles from one aunt or uncle to the next. Droughts of the 1920’s led to the Dust Bowl of the 1930’s; times were hard. Another mouth to feed wasn’t always wanted around the table. He never felt like he had a place to belong. There was no security, no trust, for a young boy to build upon. He worked hard every day of his life-wanting to provide a home for his family-a home that he never had. He did just that; he provided very well. He was a Christian, but he lived a life of anxiousness and worry, and negativity. His childhood experiences taught him to expect the worse. His fears controlled his life. Even in his process of dying, my father’s anxiety and worry and fears were foremost. Fear can control our lives, and worry can rob us of life.

So while Fear can motivate our lives, our actions-in a negative way-how much more so can Faith motivate our lives, our actions – in a positive way. Faith leads us to live and to take action, to act in trust. Our faith tells us that we are created by God, beloved children of God, and accepted by God. If faith is a verb, as I suggest, then our faith is about living it out in this world.

Then “faithing” is living as God’s beloved. Faithing is knowing (not in our heads) in our souls – the very depths of our beings - how valuable we are - how sacred all are. Faithing is living out of that sacred knowing, affirmed and whole selves. Then in faith, we do not need to put others down in order to feel better about ourselves. We do not need to judge others in order to believe we are better than. If we truly can take in and accept in faith - in spite of our mistakes, missteps and blunders- that we are loved by God then we can trust our identity as God-given and we need not search the world or anyone else to give us identity. Faithing is living out our lives - words, actions, behaviors, and beliefs- taking action as beloved people of God.

Faith is trust and taking action based on trust. It is continuing to work for social healing - seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, pleading for the widow-even though it is difficult to always see results of our efforts immediately—or even in our lifetimes.

It is trusting that if we keep on faithing- living out trust in goodness of God - the kingdom of God will come to pass. We are told of The Hall of the Faithful in Hebrews “all of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.”

By faith, we continue to work for healing in our broken world and in our own lives because we trust God. We trust that God’s kingdom can and will come to pass WHEN we allow God to use us. Faith is pouring the Living Water on the pump of our life – taking action- because we trust the One who leads us will never run dry.

May we live faith.