

“Faith Is a Journey”

When I hear a familiar phrase, some times I curiously ask, “Where did it come from and what does it mean?” One such term this week inspired my interest: “starting from scratch.” I learned that the phrase goes back to colonial times when two owners wanted to test their horses’ speed in an informal match race ... away from public view. The rival owners selected a clear straight stretch of road and drew a line in the dirt with a stick. They began at that point ... “starting from scratch.” If you want to bake a batch of biscuits from “scratch,” basic ingredients are needed: flour, salt, butter, and water when mixed together will produce “scratch” biscuits.

In Hebrews 11, the author urges us to remember that one of the “scratch” ... one of the essential ingredients of the Christian life is faith ... a faith that can move mountains, but begins as a mustard seed in the fertile soul of a Christian believer. In a superb definition of faith, the writer of Hebrews says that faith is being sure of what we hope for. Keep that thought in mind ... biblical faith is based on hope. Hope is an eternal flame burning in the heart of the believer ... who places hope in God for the future. When we journey through life ... we need to scratch the surface of our “statements of faith,” and search our hearts and minds for hope ... a hope that is instilled in us through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In some way, each Sunday we “start from scratch,” in order to renew our lives on the firm foundation of faith.

When I’m struggling with my own faith, there is a verse in a hymn that I find very helpful: *Of all my prayers, may this be chief: Till faith is fully grown, Lord, disbelieve my unbelief, and claim me as Your own.* I am struck by the thought of asking God to forgive or to forget my doubts ... my fears ... my mistrusts, and accept me as a person with limited faith. This to me is awesome thought ... that you and I can approach God with less than certainty ... approach God with all our questions ... questions that just won’t allow us to believe everything we are taught about God.

What a profound thought that we can bring to God in prayer our skepticism, our doubt, our less-than-perfect nature ... even our unbelief ... and in turn dare to boldly ask God to disbelieve our less than faithful thoughts. This is true! We can pray in such a manner, because we pray to a God who is approachable, who loves, who listens, and never abandons us. The fact is our relationship to God is not status quo ... is not static. Our relationship with God, which we call “faith,” is best characterized as a journey ... as a movement outward in trust that God leads us by the bonds of love.

The term “faith” has a wide range of meaning. Faith can for example refers to a particular religion ... a body of doctrine ... it can range in meaning from bare intellectual assent to personal commitment. However, in the book of Hebrews, “faith” is used primarily not in terms of a body of doctrine to be intellectually accepted or embraced ... but today’s lesson refers to faith as that which causes trust and reliability ... that which provides us with confidence and trust. It is faith in the active sense ... an assurance that prompts action. It is the Biblical view that history leads somewhere and has purpose.

Moreover, the Bible proposes that a personal and loving God directs history’s course ... has acted decisively in it in Jesus ... and stands at history’s end. It is only with this definition of faith that life makes any sense ... that there is a moral order, and that we can work for truth and goodness. Whatever the exact shape of the future, we, as believers, must approach it with faith ... not fear ... with the assurance that God’s will and purpose shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. In this way, we can be comfortable with the future.

In fact, the writer of Hebrews takes a forward view. The writer not only acknowledges the contributions of Abraham, Moses, and other Old Testament figures of faith, but holds them out as examples of the people of God who “went ahead,” rather than retreat into the past. Not that the past or the present is unimportant. As the philosopher Kierkegaard once wrote: *We live our lives forward, but we understand them backwards.*

Then again, most of us have the attitude like that of a young boy in the Mel Lazarus comic strip who tells Miss Peach that what frightens him most about life is *realizing that my future is in the hands of a hopelessly incompetent fool ... namely me!* The only antidote for that type of fear is faith ... faith not in one’s self ... which contains the fear of the fool ... but faith in God and the unfolding future of the heavenly kingdom.

When we’re fearful or uncomfortable of the future, our tendency is to look longingly to the past. It is a disease called “nostalgia”. This desire for the past easily beckons to us, so that we frequently long for things as they used to be. And yet, our memories are quite selective. Our nostalgia is for *only* a portion of the past. Some of us fondly remember the “good old days” when one could buy hamburger at two pounds for a quarter. But when one also recalls the infrequency of those quarters and the length of bread lines, one doesn’t want to go back after all. To what era would you return?

I wouldn't want to go back to the fifties when I was a teenager ... back to heating a house by coal ... no air conditioning ... party line phones ... an 8 hour trip from Pittsburgh to Washington over old Route 40 ... clothes that all had to be ironed and medical procedures that mean some of us would not be alive today. Our faith calls us to look longingly to the future not the past. Life is out ahead of us and God continues to lead us forward ... as God led those faith heroes of the past ... like Moses from Egypt to the Promised Land. Just think if Moses had chosen the comfort of his present situation and rejected the future ... how different the history of the world would be.

The Book of Hebrews teaches us that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for". Theologian Emil Brunner relates faith and hope to the dimensions of time (past, present, and future). He writes: *Faith has to do with the ground on which we stand. Hope is reaching out to that which shall yet be.* Therefore, for our understanding, faith is not so much a noun as it is a verb. That is, faith is not a possession ... faith is not something we have and hold. Faith is an activity, a never-ending movement in response to an ever-seeking God. Faith is a journey, a movement from birth to death, during which time we encounter God and establish, and re-establish a relationship with God.

Abraham and Sarah ventured forth toward the unknown, but trusting in God, they were given a child and the family of Israel was born. Over time, this family was enslaved in Egypt. God heard their cries and called Moses to lead them out of slavery. The journey began again ... the journey called Exodus. The third great journey of the Hebrew Scriptures is the journey out of Babylonian captivity. The Hebrews were liberated and they journeyed back home. Here we learn that the God we worship beckons, evokes, and prods us on a journey called "faith."

The New Testament has its own journey story ... the story of discipleship. The meaning of the word "disciple" is the initial clue. It does not mean to be "a student of a teacher," but rather to be "a follower after someone." Discipleship for us means being a follower after Jesus, or journeying with Jesus. The gospel writers organize their thoughts about Jesus as "extended travel narratives." Jesus is always on the move to somewhere else. He says something ... his words fall upon the ears of the crowd ... then he moves on.

Discipleship means "being on the road with Jesus" ... it means being a sojourner ... to have nowhere to lay one's head, no permanent resting place. This is why today's lesson from Hebrews talks about faith, not as a set of doctrines to be affirmed ... not as a list of question and answers in a Catechism ... but rather as a journey. Faith is something that we hold on to ... as we venture forth with God through our life ... faith is what we hold on to when confronted by a world that wants to destroy that faith ... wants tear us away from a relationship with God.

Some people have the impression that the purpose of the church is a place of escape ... a place to settle in and end the search. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is a good deal more exciting than that. It is an adventure ... a pilgrimage. We come here on Sundays, not to settle down, not to settle in, not to end our search. We come here to venture forth. Nothing in life is static ... be it school, job, marriage, parenthood, income, health --- nothing! Neither is faith.

Our journey of faith is marked with times of firm commitment and times of apathy ... times of rock solid belief and times of much unbelief ... times of wonderful, dedicated service and times of inactivity. Our religious experiences are mixed ... sometimes we are sure and sometimes our once firm faith slips away. But there are times we come back and actually realize that we didn't lose our faith. We simply grew into a different kind of relationship with God. H. Richard Niebuhr spoke of faith vividly as *shipwreck, gladness, and amazement* ... great metaphors for the transforming nature of faith.

Paraphrasing Niebuhr: There are the "shipwreck" times of our life, a coming apart at the seams, a collapse of a certainty, a disappointment, a suffering, a bewilderment, an emptiness, a defeat, or a betrayal ... a rip in the fabric of life. How did we stay afloat ... we do not know! But we survive!! Battered and bruised, we wash upon a new shore and there is gladness ... the gladness of relief and restoration. We discover we have not died, but are whole again, and we experience a new sense of vitality, be it quiet or exuberant.

We're not sure how or why we survived the "shipwreck," but we did. When we further reflect upon the difficult experiences of our life and wonder where the strength came from to endure ... where the courage came from to keep us hoping ... where the light came from that showed us the way ... when we reflect, we can not help but be amazed as we ought to be! Grace, you may recall, is amazing!

I believe that Easter is what happens to us when we look back and say: *I survived that?! Who walked with me through the valley of long, dark shadows? Who restored my soul? Who led me from my wilderness; who freed me from my slavery; who brought me home, safe upon these shores? Who, indeed!!* Faith is a journey with God, who came in Jesus, in order to walk with us and sometimes carry us. I also believe that baptism is God's permanent mark on us that prompts our praying words: *Of all my prayers, may this be chief: Till faith is fully grown, Lord, disbelieve my unbelief, and claim me as Your own.* And so God does ... you and me ... children of God. Claimed! Amazing! Absolutely amazing!