

Exodus 4:1-17

Faith in Yourself

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This month our worship theme is Faith. The topic of faith is at the heart of the Bible. This topic forms the basis for everything we do in the church. Some people come to church to find faith. Others come to church to strengthen their faith or they come to re-discover it after they've had a crisis of faith. Last Thursday I asked the Bible Study class what they thought the meaning of faith was for them. They had some wonderful answers.

- Faith gives life meaning.
- Without faith you are full of fear.
- Believing in God or a Higher Power that you cannot define, enhances the quality of life.
- Faith is the sense you have that no matter what happens God is in control of the world.
- Our lives are different because of faith.

Now I imagine that if I asked you to tell me what you think about faith and write something down on your bulletin we would get an even richer variety of answers.

Every week in October we will take a look at the story of Moses, one of the oldest stories of faith. The story of Moses is really a story about how faith was invented in our Judeo Christian tradition. We see how faith develops and how it all unfolds here in the fourth chapter of Exodus. After God called Moses at the burning bush then Moses and God start to negotiate the deal they are making. Let's take a closer look and see what we can learn from this passage for our lives today.

In the first place, you cannot have faith without doubt. The best part of this story of Moses's faith is that we get to see it evolving. Faith is not like a light switch. You cannot turn it on. In the story of Moses we get a ringside seat on the conversations that Moses had with God as Moses' faith grew. Moses was not born with faith. No one is. He did not have it automatically when God called him either. We get to pull back the curtain and hear Moses' private thoughts, his deep self-doubts, his fears of abandonment, and even his distrust of God. The Bible reminds us here that faith is not even a pretty picture all the time. The Bible helps us to accept our own doubts because it shows us that one the greatest towers of faith – a man widely regarded as the inventor of faith – did not start out believing in God. He had a steep learning curve. He started with questions.

Now many people assume that when you come to a church you need to be prepared to find faith, or take a leap of faith. They think that you have to leave your doubts at home or at least in the car when you come to worship. A lot of people worry that you have to have faith to be a Christian at all. They do not know what to do with their doubts.

But, in fact the Bible is a long story about people over the last 3000 years who have learned how to live with faith, and have had to build relationships with God. It shows how they have struggled to have faith. Inevitably they had some days where they felt secure about their faith. Other times they were not sure what they believed. That is normal. Some days we love God with our heart and soul. We are peace with our neighbors. Those times are rare. Most days, quite honestly, we don't know what to believe. We are jealous of our neighbors, or frustrated with God. We worry about what God wants us to do with our lives. We worry about how to cope with the challenges in our lives. We wonder where God is, and why we cannot see God more often.

The Bible is realistic about doubt. God calls Moses by talking through a burning bush. Moses has already seen a pretty inspiring natural wonder. But then when God reveals the plan that Moses is supposed to confront Pharaoh, Moses cannot backpedal fast enough. What if the Pharaoh does not believe me? What if he does not pay any attention to me at all? God proves His strength to Moses through a series of miracles. His staff becomes a snake, and then it turns back into a staff. His hand turns leprous, and then God heals it. It is impressive. But still Moses is throwing up obstacles. After three miracles which would have convinced any skeptic, Moses says, “I can’t talk. I am not a public speaker. “

Moses is scared. Fear has defined his decisions. He is scared of Pharaoh. He is also scared of God. He may even be scared of success or this new destiny. So even when God calls him, Moses is terrified.

Wise people have always paid a lot of attention to doubt. Bertrand Russell wrote, “The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are so certain of themselves, but wiser people are so full of doubts.” Robert Browning said “I show you doubt to prove that faith exists.”

We assume that doubt is the opposite of faith, but doubt is in the middle between belief and disbelief. People who don’t care at all about faith don’t spend time wrestling with their doubts. People who doubt are wrestling with their faith. We hold up this ideal that faith is pristine or simple or unquestioning. But the only kind of faith that is without doubt is rigid faith or naïve faith. Mature faith is always a victory over doubt. It is hard-won. There is nothing wrong with doubt; it is a sign of honesty.

In the second place, belief in yourself is always linked to belief in God. Moses doubts himself, until he begins to trust in God. When he sees how much God believes in him, then he starts to have faith in himself. I was interested to note that in all our conversations about faith in the Bible study no one mentioned that faith in yourself is an important part of having faith.

Most of us don't think about self-confidence as part of religion. But I think real faith in yourself is tied to an understanding that God believes in you. God needs you. God depends on you. As Moses began this journey he was full of doubt, but with each trip to Pharaoh, his own sense of self-confidence grew and grew. With each hurdle, and even in some defeats, Moses learned to trust himself. That process of trusting in his abilities was part of his faith journey.

Finally we all need a sign from time to time. We think that questioning God will be an affront to God, but God responds to Moses' questions with signs and miracles to help Moses see the truth. God recognizes Moses needs re-assurance, so he turns the staff into a snake, and makes the hand white, and turns the river water into blood.

Most people today assume that it is rude to seek some signs to re-assure you in times of uncertainty. Remember Thomas, the disciple who doubted. When Jesus rose from the dead he appeared to the disciples. But Thomas was not there. He wanted to believe, but he was honest enough to say, "Unless I see his wounds, I cannot imagine how to believe this." Jesus came to show him his body. There is nothing wrong with that. Now the gospel of John says, "Blessed are those who believe without needing help". But if you don't believe you have to be honest about that; otherwise you never will find your way to faith. If Thomas had pretended to believe, he never would have found faith. He needed a sign. He knew enough to ask for it.

Sometimes all we need is to know we are not alone. I like the way that at the end of this passage Moses has watched his staff turn into a snake and then turn back. He has seen his hand turn leprous and then get healed. But then God tells him, "don't worry; you won't be alone. I will send your brother with you. "

There are times when we just need help. We cannot figure it out. We need some re-assurance that we are not all alone. That sign may come from any number of sources: it might be a meal made for

us that nourishes us in body and spirit. It might be a card that lifts us up. It might be a gift that reminds us we are not alone. It might be something that seems like an answer to prayer. There are times in all of our lives when we need God to send a sign.

There is a story in *Christian Century* this week about a Scottish pastor who was a prisoner of war in a camp in Poland. “The conditions were dreadful. They only had a thin soup and piece of bread to eat each day. People were starving, sick and desperate. Suicide was a real option. When men had had enough they would run for the fence and the German guards would shoot them from the towers. In the middle of the night this man walked to the perimeter to sit down by the fence in the dark, to think about it. He heard something in the darkness from the other side. When he peered into the black, a Polish farmer reached through the fence and handed the man a potato. In heavily accented English he said, “The body of Christ.” This infantryman went back to his barracks, survived the war, and became a clergyman. {*Shared Meal* by John Buchanan, *Christian Century* October 2, 2013 p. 3}

I hope that when you come to this table in a few moments that the broken bread may be a sign of faith for you, as well. I don’t know what struggles you bring to the Lord’s Table today, but I hope that you will find here some tangible sign that God is on your side and you are not alone in this faith journey we call life.