

BELIEVING IN ORDER TO SEE

Hebrews 11: 1-3; Mark 1: 14-20

How many of you remember the first time you learned to ride a bike, or swim, or anything else you may have found hard to imagine you could ever do? How did you do it? Well, a big part of it is not so much listening to the instructions attentively and following them carefully. Nor is it about getting the physical support of an older person we trust present with us to teach us. No. The biggest single factor to learning how to do something we've never done before is whether we can believe we can do it. Can we believe even before we see? Can we believe in ourselves even before we achieve what we're aiming for because someone else believes in us and even sees where we can go before we're even able to see it?

I remember first learning to ride my bike. From three wheels to four wheels to two wheels, it was all about my dad believing in me and believing for me too. He was so convincing and compelling in assuring me I could do it, that I came to believe it myself. I saw myself riding with two wheels even before I actually did it because my dad saw it in me. It takes someone you trust, someone who is credible and compelling to make you see something even before it happens. You believe it before you see it because someone else sees it too.

OK, but riding a bike, learning to swim, learning to read or write are one thing. But what about some of the bigger challenges of our time? What about peace in our world in the face of severe and prolonged conflict? What about slowing down and even stopping climate change? How do we come to believe that's possible even before we see it happen?

A couple of weeks from now, we're scheduled to have a podcast discussion (February 13). The podcast is an interview with a renowned climate activist, a Costa Rican diplomat by the name of Christiana Figueres. Figueres makes a very compelling case that even though our climate crisis can seem overwhelming for most of us and cause us despair about our future and that of future generations, she believes there is real hope for change. And she believes there is hope because she sees what is in the process of happening in our world. She calls it a spiritual evolution and a global transformation. She sees it happening even before it's happened. She sees it because she believes it is happening and will happen.

OK, you may be thinking, what planet is Figueres living on? Well, if anyone has invested their lives into environmental activism it is Figueres. Her father is considered the founder of modern Costa Rica. As the president of the nation he decided to disband the military and use the money to develop a social infrastructure of support and wellness for all the people. And all the people means human and non-human life too. For a tiny nation of 5 million people Costa Rica

offers the world a whole 10% of its natural bio-diversity and there are strict protections in place for its rainforest which covers much of the land and territory. Figueres herself got activated around climate change in the 1990s when she encountered a beautiful tiny frog in a museum. This species of frog had become extinct because of climate change. Figueres could not believe that something so beautiful no longer existed. And this was the beginning of a grief she felt that fuelled her passion to step into service on behalf of the planet.

Eventually Figueres became a global leader in climate action and was given the post of executive secretary of the United Nations Framework on Climate Change from 2010-2016. Her biggest claim to fame was as the powerhouse who made the historic 2015 Paris agreement on climate change possible. 195 nations made significant commitments to address climate change with targets aimed at 2030. Even though we listen to news telling us how little progress is being made on such targets by first world nations of the world like our own Canada, Figueres believes many of these targets are not only achievable, but significant movement is happening on the ground already despite the politicking of governments and leaders at the top which often make the headlines.

OK, so how is it that Figueres has such hope, especially as she continues to be full on in global negotiations toward meeting climate targets? Are we not reaching that point of no return in terms of global warming and all the extreme weather events that can never be reversed in intensity?

Without giving away all that Figueres says about hope and spiritual transformation in the podcast, and without experiencing the vibrancy of the hope she exudes (which you will have to experience yourself by listening to the podcast), she makes some important distinctions about how we humans face any crisis that comes before us. There are four different ways we humans react to any crisis: flight, freeze, fight... or faith. Let me outline these four responses.

1) Flight means that when a crisis comes we run away, we seek to escape either by denying the facts, turning off anything we don't want to hear or know, or just refusing to face the reality before us. Flight is a common approach many of us take and continue to take when confronted by a crisis in our lives.

2) Freeze means that we are so overwhelmed by the crisis that we are paralyzed in doing anything. We get stuck in place because we just don't know what to do about it or what we can do about it. We are terrified and helpless.

3) Fight means we resist what we hear and we attack the source of the crisis in our minds. Who are the people or organizations or the systems or the leaders or the governments causing the crisis? Anger is our fuel and anger can easily turn vengeful, hateful and even spiteful. Fight can even burn us out, and this is something Christiana has encountered in many environmental

activists – the swing from anger and outrage, to burnout, to all-out despair about the future... This is something we see in many who have invested themselves in doing something against climate change. Fighting the crisis can burn us out and we end up in a flight or freeze state of being if not all-out despair.

And how true this is about any one of the many crises that we all have faced and no doubt will face in our lives as well, no? Whether the crisis is health-related, financial, a relationship, our work-place or business, our vocations... whatever it is, what approach do we take to react and respond to a crisis in our lives? Is it a flight response until the situation becomes too severe to escape but then also maybe too late to change course? Is it a freeze response where we become unable to do anything, helpless or just frozen in our current state of affairs? Do we react and respond with anger and blame and seek to fight our way through and beyond no matter how many bridges we burn and how many people we hurt in the process and perhaps, eventually, burning ourselves out too? Or is there another way to respond?

There is, and this fourth way which Christiana talks about in her own life personally as much as in relation to our climate crisis, is the way of faith. So what exactly is the way of faith? To help us explore the way of faith, let us turn to our scripture readings in search of revelatory insight.

Our first reading comes from the book of Hebrews. The 11th chapter is all about faith and it provides a number of examples of what faith looks like in the living out of it. From the Old Testament all the way to Jesus, it is pointing to a key theme which is expressed in the opening verse: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In other words, those who respond to a challenge or crisis by faith, move forward in trust even when they cannot see the outcome. They trust that they will get through, that God will provide a way, that good will come even when there may be difficulty and trouble. God doesn't control the choices others will make, nor the circumstances of life, and nor does God restrain the free play of forces within mother nature as she reacts and responds to any number of realities including human behaviour. But the assurance and conviction of faith is that choosing to discern and then follow through in the way of love in the face of any challenge or hardship will lead to a blessing in some way.

But can we believe even if we cannot see the outcome with any clarity? Can we believe even if what we see more immediately is the trouble and we feel frozen, want to fly away from it all or flail around fighting and blaming and striking out?

Well, then comes our second reading from the gospel. Jesus has just been baptized by John, and once John is arrested Jesus picks up John's mantle and proclaims a similar message to John with a bit more of an emphasis on this: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Repent of your unbelief, your lack of faith and trust which keeps you frozen or in denial because you prefer to escape the challenges and the

trauma of what you've lived and are living. Repent of how your rage or your despair is driving your attitude to life or your actions, and tearing apart your relationships and care for one another. The kingdom of God has come near. We can build relationships of love and care with one another, hope for richer communion and a better quality of life. Blessings can come for you even if we cannot see how exactly it will look because we don't yet have enough imagination as to what's possible.

You see how the message is designed to be heard? But here's the big question: can people believe, can they have faith, can they trust in what Jesus is proclaiming? Pulling the scab off of despair and hopelessness, or anger, or paralysis or escape in order to face life's challenges head on in a fresh way can be scary. The risk of fresh pain, hurt and disillusionment is real. And yet when faith grabs hold of people, they can see things new because they can believe. They don't have to see it all come to be to believe it can come to be. They see it even before it happens because they now believe it can happen.

And so it is for this first set of disciples of Jesus. What is it that Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John see? Jesus tells them to follow him and his vision. He calls them to see what he sees. They fish for fish, but Jesus promises that his message of the kingdom and his vision of what's possible with the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of the world... it will draw in more than fish. It will draw in people and it will create a new reality that God has dreamed for the people from the beginning of creation. Can they believe and see what Jesus sees? Will they follow?

Yes... We're told they leave everything they're doing, their work and all, because now they will follow Jesus into a new adventure. They believe and they see. But what do they see? Nothing has happened yet. All they see is this man with a message and a vision. But something is stirred in them, something powerful and something transformational. Like the people around them, so far, they have responded to the crisis of their situation as a people with flight, freeze or fight responses. But now, something else has opened up in their minds and hearts: faith. And even though they don't know what this will look like and how exactly it will come to be, they believe and they follow.

So, what about you and me? We all know what it's like to freeze, fly away or fight in a destructive way through our challenges or crises. But what about faith? What about trust? Can we believe that love will win in our lives and here and there in our world despite how obvious the destructive realities and crises come up against us day in and day out? How do we find our way to faith again and again through every situation personal, or even some of the big worries and fears like our climate crisis? How do others help us see what we cannot fully see and help us believe so that we too begin to see?

Life is more complicated than learning to ride a bike, learning how to swim or learning some other new thing we've never imagined learning before. And life may be more demanding than any number of hurdles or challenges we've faced thus far. But do we believe that with God above, beside and within us we can see new things we've never seen before and walk new pathways in our lives we've never walked before? Do we believe we can fly even if we've never flown before or done it a certain way before? Do we believe love can truly bring victory not only in our lives, but even beyond our lives in our world and in our being beyond this world as it currently is?

In this season of Epiphany, pray for faith and hope to carry you in love into this next chapter of your life and all you will face ahead... Amen.