

TRAINING THE FAITH THAT IS IN YOU

Zephaniah 1: 12-18; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

Sam was a hip-looking 30-something year old man. I met him one Sunday after church as he just sat in the pew with his eyes closed listening to the organ postlude. After it was over, I went over to say hello. I asked him what brought him to us that Sunday. He had a story to tell. It was a story about a young man who had done everything right. He grew up within a good, loving family. He was smart. He went to school and got a degree in graphic design. He got a great job at an advertising firm. He was moving up the ladder. He had lots of friends and a girlfriend with whom he'd been together for many years. But something didn't feel right. Even as his life was supposed to be perfect, he began to feel a dis-ease within.

Eventually he lost his passion. He fell into a depression. Some medication and therapy helped, but he still felt something was missing. Eventually things fell apart with his girlfriend. Eventually he had something like a nervous breakdown. He was off from work for months. He slept much of that time. Finally, with some good therapy he was beginning to emerge from the pit. He quit his job. What he would do next, he didn't know. But what he did know was that he had to get his spiritual house into some order. He had become aware of some hunger inside, a hunger that had been pushed aside for much of his growing years. He wanted to dig deeper into this 'faith thing.' The worship service had definitely awakened his hunger for something more. Where would it lead him?

I lost track of Sam after a few years as I moved on. I hope and trust he has cultivated and nurtured this 'faith thing.' But I also know we live increasingly in a world here in Canada, where faith in something beyond yourself and beyond the tangible and material is not a priority for most people. 'Spirituality' may be a little icing on the cake of life or some added insurance against potential misfortune, but beyond that, it's not something most people prioritize as worthy of major attention or focus.

But here's the thing about faith. It's not a given. Faith is a gift. It's a seed, and the fact that you are all here today in person or online means that maybe you have this seed in you. But like any seed, unless there is good soil cultivated, regular watering and regular exposure to sunlight, whatever has begun to

grow will wither and die. Like any muscle, unless it's exercised, stretched and built up, it will atrophy. That's just the way it is.

Sometimes, the seed is hidden and only emerges after some crisis in life. For Sam, his inner crisis was the active agent in awakening the seed of faith that had been dormant and hidden in him. Other times, people emerge out of their crises and build positive lives without faith in a larger ground of being as their driving motivator. It's a mystery why some are given the seed and others not. But we must not judge. God loves everyone the same whether they have faith or not.

OK, preacher, so what's the message then? My message is that for those of us who are blessed with the gift that is the seed of faith, and for those of us who want to explore if this faith thing in us can flourish, we need what the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard calls: Training in Christianity. Training is an exercise word and it's deliberate. Kierkegaard was writing and engaging people in 19th century Europe. Everybody lived in a world where you were born and bred a Christian. It was assumed everyone had faith. It was like having a hand, a foot or an ear. To be human was to have faith. Not so, argued Kierkegaard. For faith to be real you had to experience this inner stirring, this fire, this hunger and thirst. And then, you had to train it and grow its muscles, otherwise it would atrophy and become useless in the critical times of life.

OK then, let's start by fleshing out a little further what faith is before we ponder how we train it. As already hinted above, faith is like a fire inside you, a stirring, a burning, a longing, a desiring, a seeking... St. Augustine of the 4th century calls it a restlessness that will not let you rest until you give yourself to it wherever it takes you. Faith is also never satisfied by what this world has to offer in terms of money, security, status, possessions, recognition and praise... Faith wants more and will not rest in its search for more... not more stuff, but more beauty, greater truth, higher justice, a deeper wholeness... the word we Christians have come up with for this more is God. Until we find 'God' ever more fully, the hunger and thirst of faith in us will keep us restless, seeking, searching and burning within...

OK, you may be thinking, so why is it that sometimes, oftentimes, the fire in me is not burning too bright? Why is it that doubt and questioning, or plain indifference grab hold of me and I'm feeling dry as a desert or despairing and alone inside? Why am I so often distracted and sidelined by other pursuits so that I bury the seed of faith where it cannot trouble me so much?

There are many reasons. But however it happens, there are at least three ways the flame of faith is smothered in us. Let's zero in on these ways as we draw them from our scripture readings.

First, there is complacency. "At this time I will search Jerusalem with lamps and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm." The prophet is angry with the people and he projects this anger into his image of God. God is angry because the people are complacent. They've fallen asleep spiritually. Complacency means we just don't care enough. There is no fire burning inside. We're satisfied and content, cozy and comfortable with life as it is. We don't have a burning passion, desire, longing, hunger and thirst to seek until we find something more, a greater understanding of truth, a greater justice, a greater beauty, a wholeness that is greater than the fragments and missing pieces within. Complacency means we are spiritually asleep if not dead. We need to be awakened. So, what can awaken us out of complacency into something like faith?

This brings us to our second problem area when it comes to faith – fear. The prophet wants to shake the people out of their spiritual lethargy. And so, he tries to scare them into awakening faith: "The great day of the Lord is near.... That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish... neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them..." The prophet has a vision of destruction to come in the form of foreign invasion. And this invasion will be interpreted as a judgement of God because the people are complacent rather than passionate in their seeking and longing.

And you know, fear has always been a tool to get people fired up. But what does fear fire up in people? People obey when they're scared. They obey the rules. How much is our wearing of masks because we're scared and how much is it also because we care? Fear is a useful method of getting compliance. But what about our hearts? If faith is a heart thing, fear cannot activate it. Fear shuts down our hearts. Faith can only burn with the fire that is longing. And longing is a kind of love. Fear makes us do things because we want to avoid punishment, judgement or an unfavorable outcome. Fear cannot awaken the fire of longing in us.

And so, if complacency kills our hunger and thirst for more, for higher and better and deeper, fear kills our capacity to trust our heart's longing and seeking.

OK, but this brings us to one more problem area still: disillusionment and despair. In our second reading, the apostle Paul is writing to people who are struggling with disillusionment and despair. They gave their hearts to Jesus and his way. They're paying a price for it because the way of love is crushed in a time where hate and revenge are what burns in people. Jesus promised he would return to establish his kingdom of sovereign love more fully on earth as it is in heaven. But it hasn't happened yet, and people are being persecuted. Some have already died. Jesus, where are you? God, where are you?

How often have you felt disillusioned? How often have you been gripped by a feeling of despair – despair in people, in situations, in your faith, in God? We have expectations. There is a burning, a seeking and a longing within us. It needs direction, fuel, hope. It seeks some kind of fulfillment. When this doesn't happen, the fire goes out. We lose ourselves and our way.

Well, the apostle wants to fire them up again. But he doesn't use fear to fire them up. Fear shuts faith down. Fear only gets people to do things because they're scared not because they have a fire of longing in them. And so, Paul uses other imagery: "Put on the breastplate of faith and love" he writes, "and for a helmet the hope of salvation." This imagery is battle imagery. We live in a world where you have to fight to keep faith alive. You need to train. You need to fuel the fire of faith so that you attain the greater wholeness you're after.

Paul also adds the word hope. Hope is like faith, but it also has a future focus. Hope is faith into the future. Hope is trusting the journey and where it will take you even when there's no clear timeline, for it will come "as a thief in the night" the apostle says. You cannot predict when Christ will return, when you will reach final fulfillment, when you will reach salvation. Salvation means wholeness. We are on a journey toward greater wholeness. Faith is the fuel to get us there. But there's no set timeline. Our hope points the way and opens us up to enjoy the moments of fulfillment along the way.

And finally, the apostle also adds the word love. Love is compassion. Love is care. But love is also passion, desire, longing. Love is opposed to fear. Is it

fear that drives you or is it love. Is it fear of something outside you or is it the burning of passion and desire that is love in your heart that is propelling you to fight for something more, refusing to settle for less? Faith needs hope and faith needs love to keep it seeking and searching, hungering and thirsting.

OK, but there's one final thing: "Therefore," the apostle says, "encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." Sam wanted to explore this "faith thing." But the environment he was in and had come out of had no use for this 'faith thing.' It was cool that Sam had this hunger and thirst, but wouldn't a better job, a new partner, a promotion, a new house or car or success, fulfill it? Sam knew he was seeking something else, something more, something different. So, he came to church. He came to church in search of others who also had this burning inside them, this hunger and thirst. He wanted the music, the prayers, the words, the scripture, the silence... he wanted the conversation, the discussion, the fellowship...

You and me, we have been given a gift. Sometimes it feels more like a torment than a gift. Who wants to feel restless and seeking for something more a lot of the time? Yet, every new insight and discovery, every new inner experience of 'aha', every new awakening to transcendence and to God, every ounce of inner healing, of finding home, of finding communion and connection at the spiritual level... it's a gift beyond all others.

We're on a journey, you and me. Don't worry how long it will take. Don't worry about measuring how far you have come or how much time and energy you've wasted going in circles. Don't worry about those patches in life where complacency, fear or disillusionment and despair have dominated you. That's going to happen because life is like that. But just remember, the fire is still burning. Train yourself so that you keep fueling it again and again, and then, trust the journey wherever it will take you.

Let us pray: Fuel the fire in us, O God... breathe into us some of that greater wholeness we're after... feed our hunger, quench our thirst... but don't ever let us settle for less than the fullness you are... Amen.