

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT

August 7, 2022 (9 Pentecost, Proper 14-C) by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Genesis 15: 1-6. Psalm 33:12-22. Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16. Luke 12:32-40

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If a friend asked you, “What does faith mean to you? How does faith work in your life?”, how might you answer? What does faith mean to you? How does faith work in your life?

The Bible is filled with stories of how faith in God and lack of faith in God impacts the lives of people. Today’s reading from Hebrews begins with a classic definition of faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

There is deep wisdom here, yet the writer of Hebrews probably recognized that people would have difficulty understanding his definition of faith, so he spends the next three chapters giving examples of how faith was practiced by our spiritual ancestors. Giving examples of how faith works is a much more helpful way of talking about faith because faith is not an idea or a belief. The Hebrew and Greek words for faith really mean trust.

Faith is a way of living that is grounded in deep trust that God’s loving presence is with us always, seeking to guide us in all our relationships with God, our neighbors, with ourselves, and with God’s creation, in all the ordinariness, the joys, confusions, and painful realities of our daily lives.

As an example of how faith works, Hebrews tells the story of Abraham and Sarah. When Abraham was 75 and Sarah was 65, God called them to leave their home in Ur of the Chaldees, and to go to a place that God would show them. So they left, not knowing where they were going, but trusting God’s guidance, even though they did not know how God would guide them. That was faith in action.

Most of us can tell stories of how we have been guided by God over our lifetime, when we did not know how our future would unfold. Hasn’t your journey through life involved many surprises, both joyful and painful?

For example, Rebecca and I have been guided to live in eight different places in our fifty-four years of marriage. Every time we moved to a new place we could not imagine what the next chapter of our lives would be like. With every move came surprise joys and difficult challenges. The difficult challenges pushed us outside our comfort zones. To survive, we needed to keep seeking God’s guidance every day, praying, asking for help, reflecting on Scripture, seeking to live in constant loving relationship with God and our neighbors, trusting God to show us the next steps we should take in whatever situation we found ourselves. We have never done this perfectly. Yet our struggles and imperfections kept leading us back to seek and trust God’s presence and love more deeply, because we knew we could not manage or control our way through the challenges, even with our best efforts. That is how faith has worked in our lives.

We have also known that we needed to be part of a community of Jesus followers if we wanted to keep growing in this life of faith and trust in God. Every faith community we've experienced has included people who are imperfect, as we are imperfect. Every church has had people who prayed for each other, reflected on the Bible together, sought to follow the guidance of God in our daily lives, seeking ways to love and serve our neighbors in need. We have kept growing in our faith, in our love of God and neighbors because of the examples, the prayers, encouragement, wisdom and support of people in small groups and congregations wherever we have lived, including this congregation.

I'm sure each of you can tell stories of how God has guided you through all the ups and downs of your life in ways you could not have planned or imagined. We all need to tell the next generations our stories of how faith and trust in God's presence and guidance... and the support of a faith community... have been crucial in the unfolding journey of our lives.

We have all learned from experience that sometimes God's guidance comes quickly and sometimes it takes time. After God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their home and trust God's guidance, they lived in tents, moving from place to place for 25 years. They kept wondering, where is God leading us? Will God ever show us the purpose of our meandering journey through life?

Early in their journey, God promised them a family that would become as numerous as the stars in the sky. But Abraham and Sarah still had no child. For 25 years they kept questioning God...when are you going to fulfill your promise to us?

Finally, when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90, three visitors showed up and told them God's message: they would bear a son in the next year. Sarah laughed at the impossible thought that at their advanced age, after a lifetime of being childless, they would soon birth a son. Faith and trust can lead us to laugh with joy and gratitude at the amazing ways God works in our lives to bring new beginnings out of dead ends, like bringing a new birth out of an old man and woman who were way past childbearing years, like bringing Christ's resurrection on the other side of death on a cross.

Have you experienced that faith often includes an element of doubt, as it did for Abraham and Sarah? Remember the man who said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief"?

This week a very faithful priest called me to say she was losing hope for our nation and world. She was really asking, can we trust God to bring something good out of all the hostile political divisions and lies, all the violence and injustices in our nation and world?

As we prepare for Fr. Tom's leaving, it is easy to be anxious and fearful about our future as a congregation. Can we trust God to bring something good out of the unknowns in our future as a congregation?

Tom and Maryjane may be a bit anxious about the unknowns of their future in Ohio.

All of us are aging. We have friends struggling with horrible diseases and situations, friends who have died or are dying. Can we trust God to guide us all through the rigors of aging and dying?

On our good days, we can say, "Yes, God, I trust you to guide my future." Some days all we can say is, "Lord, I sure hope you will bring something good out of my situation...but honestly, I have real doubts and fears right now. Lord...help my unbelief."

In today's Gospel, Jesus tried to strengthen the faith of his followers. He wanted to prepare them to handle his unjust trial, his death on the cross, and his physically leaving them when he returned to be with his Father in Heaven. So Jesus said: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Jesus reminded them and us that we do not need to be afraid of the unknown future because we can trust God to be with us, working for good in the midst of our fears and failures, and the threatening changes happening all around us. Christ's unjust and cruel death was not the last word. Our worst fears, struggles, and dangers are not the last word.

God reigns over the universe God created. God so loved the world that God sent Jesus who continues to love this broken and imperfect world. The Spirit of Jesus continues to live among us and is eager to give us the gifts of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven.

We do need to be clear that God makes no promises about the future of the United States, or the future of this building and congregation. Over the centuries, nations and empires, church buildings and congregations have come and gone. There is always a mysterious interplay between God's desires and will, and human cooperation or rejection of God's ways. God is merciful and our responses have consequences.

What God does promise, what we can trust, is that God will be with us through whatever our life brings. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who works with gangs in Los Angeles, lives in the middle of constant gang violence and death. He says his faith journey has taught him this: "Christ protects me from nothing...and sustains me in everything."

Today's Scriptures have led us to reflect on how faith and trust in God work in our lives. How might God be inviting you and me to mature a bit more in our faith and trust in God?

Let me suggest a little spiritual practice you might experiment with this week. Jesus told his disciples: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." The AA Recovery movement summarizes this prayer of Jesus concisely: "Let go; let God." We could also say: "Let go; trust God." Let go of our fears, let go of our attempts to control, let go of trying figure everything out. As we let go of these things, Jesus invites us to trust God, to turn our fears over to God and let God guide us in ways we can't even imagine. Faith, or letting go and trusting God to guide us, is not something we do once, and it lasts for a lifetime. Letting go and trusting God is a way of living every day, because our fears, our desire for control and clarity are always distracting us.

I invite you to take a few moments every day this week, to be still and practice this little “let go, let God” prayer of faith. All of us will be imperfect at doing this, so be gentle with yourself. This practice of frequently letting go of fears and trusting God to guide can help us mature in faith as we deal with all the realities of our daily life.

Let’s experiment with this “let go, let God” prayer right now.

Close your eyes for a moment, take in a deep breath... and let it go, take in a deep breath...and let it go. Now ask yourself, what am I most afraid of at this time in my life? ...

Now that you are aware of your fears, ask God to help you let go of them. You might open your hands in your lap as a gesture of letting go of your fears and trusting God, letting God be the one who will lovingly guide you through the unknowns that you fear the most. Let go; trust God. Turn your fears over to God’s loving care and guidance...

O Jesus, our Good Shepherd, help us this week to be aware of our fears and anxieties, to let go of them and let you, trust you, to lovingly guide our lives, guide this congregation, our nation, your world in ways beyond all we can ask or imagine, through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.