

## Sermons at St. Luke's

*A sermon preached by the Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday, August 8, 2010.*

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Faith can often serve as a helpful check on things we just know to be so. We have seen many die, we mourn and bury them, but none yet have showed up at our door later on asking "Don't you remember me?" We at times face destructive flood waters, but there are no news reports of anyone waving a magic wand and creating a dry highway down the middle. We may know 95 year old women, such as Abraham's wife Sarah, but none who have conceived or given birth. We experience today the problem of some of God's animal creatures truly becoming extinct. No one has seen the Carolina parrot since 1913, and the Indian tiger is threatened today, as are many of the worlds' fisheries. It would be convenient if we could build an ark with two of each kind on board, and solve the problem. And on and on. Holy Scripture is chock full of such folk tales, and I mean no disrespect at all by calling them that. Twice I have stood before you and declared that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and I do indeed. I also on those two occasions assured the bishop that I would be diligent in reading and studying Scripture, which I try to do, with what God has given me, a largely 20<sup>th</sup> century western mind and at times a modicum of

common sense, I hope. And when I read it, as best I can, some of these unlikely, dare I say scientifically impossible, events jump out at me.

This is where faith comes in, thanks be to God. It is too ingrained in us to hear myth and folk tale, and think fairy tale. Our illiterate and uneducated spiritual ancestors of centuries and millennia ago were not so burdened. They understood, better perhaps than we do, that we need to learn to hear myth and think truth. Abraham 4000 years ago was not burdened by a 20<sup>th</sup> century western mind nor steeped in methods of scientific inquiry. Abraham by George heard God and listened. Life was simpler then, though infinitely more difficult.

Abraham, actually still Abram then, worried in his old age about being childless. Sarah was 95 or so then and Abraham was older, so it didn't look good for them to become parents. His only heir was Eliezer of Damascus, perhaps a distant cousin or servant, but we really don't know, as the Hebrew text is unclear just what was meant here. Abraham had no children though. That much was clear. But then the word of the Lord came to him, just as to prophets, "No one but your own children shall be your heir." Then God told him to look to heaven and count the stars, if you are able. So shall your descendants be, too many to count. Well the interesting thing about that divine promise is that it is true, in one sense, for we think of Abraham as our spiritual ancestor, at the top

of the family tree that comprises Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. That's a lot of descendants, just as there are a lot of stars in the sky on a clear night. Just try to count them. We can't, but we can marvel at them, in the same way my grandmother as a little girl marveled at the beautiful full moon over Burke County. She wondered why her grandmother was not so impressed with it until her grandmother said "you should have seen it before the war."

Those stars, and the moon which is also a star, can be a part of our faith just as they were a part of Abraham's faith. Look at the stars, look at a baby, look at examples of selfless love, and ask how any of those things are possible without divine intervention of some sort. I cannot prove it, nor can anyone disprove it, but I know it, I know it is as sure as I am standing here. That I suppose is faith, the faith we all need when times are tough, and lest we forget, when times are joyous. When grandparents die and babies are born. When rich and when poor, in sickness and in health, on glorious weekends and on Monday mornings. When the night sky is so brilliant we are overcome by it, as I have been on a Botswana hilltop, miles from any artificial light, and when the same night sky is smogged over with black smoke from an offshore oil spill.

I don't know the origin of the phrase "God never promised us a rose garden," but it's true. There is no divine promise or guarantee, in Holy

Scripture or in life, that God will kiss it and make it well. That is for grandmothers, mine anyway, and I imagine yours too. What was promised us, for all time and in all places, is that we will not be left alone, comfortless. And that promise God has kept, though there are times when things seem pretty dark. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, alone in his prison cell before being hanged at Easter 1945, wrote that he was comforted by the tangible presence of God in the Holy Spirit. We feel alone as children, but are rescued by the hand and warmth of one who loves us more than life itself. I doubt I am alone in having felt the tangible comfort, when afraid in a hospital, of the voice and listening ear of a nurse at 0300. Those who a generation ago were tortured and thrown into solitary in Hanoi were not alone. The tap code through the wall told them there was another American on the other side. Hospice volunteers help many die by showing they are not alone. Again, the Holy Spirit lives, at all times and in all places.

In the King James version of the Bible, the letter to the Hebrews is attributed to Paul the Apostle, but no Biblical scholars believe now that Paul wrote it, and that is based in large part on the fact that more ancient manuscripts of Holy Scripture have been discovered since the King James version came out in 1611 than were in existence then. So, the anonymous author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us this morning

that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Think about that, the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. It is not unlike that sure and certain hope of the resurrection we speak of in the committal portion of the burial liturgy. Well, is it sure and certain, or is it a hope? The answer of course is Yes. The psalmist understood this dichotomy in the familiar Psalm 121, often read at funerals, and probably even more in the mountains than here in the flat lands:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.  
From whence cometh my help?

I always thought this meant that the psalmist was looking up at an idyllic mountain vista, perhaps among the rhododendron on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and thinking, "Wow, that's where God lives, the source of my life and hope." I still love the idea of that, but I know now that many scholars of the Hebrew Bible, and particularly the Psalms, the hymnal of Israel, see it differently. They see the psalmist in the old City of David, below the old city of Jerusalem, the Hebron Valley in the background, and the invading army arrayed up on the hill. So the psalmist lifts up his eyes unto the hills, sees the pagan invading army there and cries out "where is my help coming from?" And you can stand there today and imagine the same. The answer of course is that the psalmist and the faithful children of Israel were not alone, for God was with them. As in

the equally familiar words of Psalm 23, “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Why? Because the Lord God is with me, I am not alone. Faith, that’s what that is.

Now back to our anonymous author of the letter to the Hebrews, whose first example of a faith-based life was none other than Abraham. You remember Abraham 4000 odd years ago was way over there in Ur, somewhere on the Arabian peninsula. God told him to pack up, all his family, flocks, and hangers-on, and get moving. I have a new home for you. It was not unlike a Broadway tune from a show perhaps 60 years ago, Paint Your Wagon: Where am I going? I don’t know. When will I get there? I ain’t certain. All that I know is I am on my way. Change is often hard, but that kind of wholesale change must have been wrenching. But Abraham had faith and knew that God would not let him down. He had faith as well in God through his long sojourn in the wilderness, living in tents. And then when he was told he and Sarah would have children, again faith dictated his response. None of these things likely made a whole lot of sense to Abraham, but these were not matters for the intellect but matters for the heart, matters of faith. We have been there, in one situation or another. We face surgery. What will it bring? We await the biopsy report. We bail out of a crippled airplane. Will the parachute work? A spouse walks out the door. What next? As we read

earlier, in Psalm 32, kings and nations are not saved by armies, nor warriors by brute force, but it is the Lord who will deliver us from death and keep us alive in famine. That's why our soul waits for the Lord, our help and shield. And we call that faith.

Without that faith that sustains us, the Gospel we heard from Luke today makes little sense, indeed much of what we do here makes little sense in the absence of faith. It takes a lot of faith, I would imagine as I have not done it, to sell all we have and give it away. And it takes faith to believe that "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Remember too that honest doubt is an integral part of faith, and that the faith of the community, our faith community, is available to us all on as needed basis. For far more often than we may want to admit, whether to ourselves, to each other, or to God, we cry out as the soldier did to Christ: Lord, I believe. Help now my unbelief.

Amen.

St. Luke's

8 August 2010