

## “What is Faith?”

How many of you, while going through a difficult time, have been told to “buck up and have faith”? As though faith is some kind of magic wand that if you wave it around and step back, all shall be well. Hmmmm, I don't think so. And while I do not believe that faith is something tangible, neither is it something to be taken for granted or treated as otherworldly.

Faith is the belief in something unseen and therefore unprovable. In our reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews the author writes,

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. (*Hebrews 11.1-2, NRSV*)

The author then goes on to state examples of faith from Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. Just in case you need a refresher, their examples of faith are these:

Abel, whose name means “breath” was the second born son to Adam and Eve. Cain, whose name means “spear” was born first. Whether or not they are twins is the matter of some speculation and best left for another time. As they grew Abel became a shepherd and Cain, a farmer. “In the course of time” both brothers brought an offering to God. Abel brought a “firstling of his flock, a fatling” and Cain made “an offering of the fruit of the ground” which we understand to be wheat.

Next we learn that God was delighted with Abel's offering, but not Cain's. Abel followed the laws of the land that was to receive the first fruits, the first and best of the harvest and gave a fatling to God. Cain gave a simple offering. Now, it's not because Abel gave a sheep and Cain gave wheat that God was angered. What angered God was that Cain gave any old offering, he did not make a gift of the first harvest. We do not know how much wheat was given, but from the sounds of it, it wasn't much. Certainly not enough for an acceptable offering.

Abel's offering pleased God because it was done with faith and reverence. Cain's offering displeased God because it was done without faith or reverence. Abel took to heart what we are told in today's reading from Hebrews "without faith it is impossible to please God." Abel had great faith, Cain had very little. And in case you forgot, in retaliation to God telling Cain to beware because without faith he would see sin knocking at his door; Cain takes Abel out into the field and kills him, then lies to God. If you want to read the rest of the story, start with Genesis 4 and keep reading.

Next on the docket is Enoch. Enoch means "dedicated" Enoch was the firstborn son of Cain and Cain's wife. We are not told her name, although Apocryphal writings tell us she was called Awan. We don't hear too much about Enoch in and amongst the names of the children and grandchildren of Adam and Eve. We know that Enoch's firstborn was called Methuselah, which means "who demands his death".

We know that Enoch "walked with God", had a close relationship with God and spent much of his time talking about his encounters with the divine. Enoch was not that appreciated during his lifetime, however, latter readings express how much of an impact he had on subsequent generations. Much of the apocryphal writings about Enoch happened in the third century, where a theory was posited that Enoch was the recipient of secret knowledge from God. It is also worth noting that all the descendents of Adam are written as "all the days of x were, and then he died". With one exception - Enoch.

We read "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him. (Genesis 5.24, NRSV) Enoch is the only one of Adam's children to receive that statement, indicating he had a special, possibly favoured relationship with God. If you want to know more about Enoch, start reading at Genesis 5 and keep going.

Next up is Noah. Noah, which means "rest" is the son of Lamech, who is the son of Methuselah, who is the son of Enoch, who is the son of Adam - making Noah the great-great-grandson of Adam. We know Noah's story quite well. He was tasked with building an ark. God was getting increasingly annoyed with humanity. At one point God considered obliterating the earth and every living thing, humans, animals, critters, fish, creatures and plants. God saw that the world was not a good place and the people were not good to each other. So, God thought it best to erase it all and perhaps try again.

We are told that, like his great-grandfather Enoch, Noah walked with God. And so God decided to spare Noah, his wife and their three sons Shem, Ham, Japeth and their wives. Noah was instructed to build an ark which was to measure three hundred cubits, by fifty cubits, by thirty cubits. How big is a cubit? It's the measurement from the inside of your elbow to the end of your middle finger.

Noah found favour with God and as such was told by God, "I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you." (*Genesis 6.18, NRSV*)

And if we fast-forward to the flood water receding, what did God's covenant look like? A rainbow. This is promised in Genesis 9 in great detail. I commend it to you for your afternoon Scripture reading.

Next up is Abraham. If you want to read more about the family genealogy, check out Genesis Chapters 4, 5 and 11. Abraham's father is Terah, whose father is Nahor, whose father is Serug, whose father is Reu, whose father is Peleg, whose father is Eber, whose father is Shelah, whose father is Arpaschad, whose father is Shem, and whose father is Noah. Whew!

Please remember that Abraham was born Abram. Abram means "exalted father" and was renamed Abraham, which means "father of many". God knew Abram and blessed him with a promise that he would be the father of many nations, as numerous as stars in the sky. Abram trusted and believed in God after the covenant which changed both his name and that of his wife Sarai, she became Sarah. Both Sarai and Sarah mean princess or noblewoman. God made the covenant with both Abraham and Sarah, that they would have many children together.

God even tested Abraham by commanding him to take his firstborn son with Sarah, called Isaac and sacrifice him on an altar at Moriah. And at the last moment, God called out to Abraham to stop, and gave a ram as a burnt offering instead of his son. You can check out this cheerful tale in Genesis 22.

In every one of these stories, God has a special relationship with these particularly chosen people: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah. God makes a promise or covenant with each of them and through each of them, the covenant is made with us as their descendants.

Thus, whenever you see a rainbow, it is a reminder from God that the world will never be flooded as it once was and that life will always return after devastation. Thankfully, these days we are not asked to sacrifice our firstborn, or give an offering upon the altar of God.

Nor are we afforded the close relationship with God that our forefathers and foremothers were. In some ways I lament that I don't have a walking, talking real-time face-to-face relationship with God; like Adam and Eve, and the rest had. However, I also would not want to be the one to figure out an appropriate sacrifice or burnt offering to retain God's favour.

What would a pastor give as an offering? An exceptionally good sermon?

In some ways I find the God of these stories to be mighty vengeful. Yes, Noah and his family were spared, but everyone, and everything else perished. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son on an altar he was commanded to build himself. And Abraham was prepared to do so.

The reason we are not asked for these kinds of sacrifices is because with the birth of Jesus, that need for sacrifices to God was fulfilled. Jesus, who is God incarnate: both fully human and fully divine, made the choice, as commanded by God, to offer his life as the final sacrifice for the salvation of humanity.

Now, whether you call this substitutionary atonement or something else, isn't important here. It's the recognition that Jesus chose to give his life. In offering his life it means that we are not asked to give offerings of first fruits or first born livestock or first born children. God does not command sacrifices in that way from us.

However, that does not mean that we are given a pass to live in any way we choose. Because we chose to follow in the way of love; in the footsteps of Jesus; we take on the responsibility of acting as an advocate for those who are sick, weak, poor, homeless, addicted, etc.

Some days are easier than others because we are fully human and regularly, we get it wrong. I know I do. Just to remind us;

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. (*Hebrews 11.1-2, NRSV*)

None of our ancestors had the opportunity to receive the promises that God has made, certainly not the promise made through Jesus. It is my hope and prayer that we do receive these promises. That we see in the next life, the covenants and promises made that there will be no more death after life.

There will be only life eternal and what a glorious life that is promised to us. Let us learn from the faithfulness of Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham what it is to have a close relationship with God. That we come to know Jesus; not as a personal Lord and Saviour, but rather, as our brother and friend.

Giving thanks to God from whom all blessings flow.  
Let the Church say Amen!

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent  
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry  
Fernie Knox United Church & Christ Church Anglican  
Fernie, BC  
Sermon for Pentecost 9 - 7 August 2022  
Hebrews 11.1-16