

Pentecost 17C (10/6/2019)

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Psalm 37:1-9

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

That faith persists in our generation is a miracle of grace. And, it's on account of the faithfulness of our forebears, generations of those who held to "the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus" and passed that promise on to us. The grace that makes faith possible is from of old, still it sustains us in and through our suffering and doubt until light finally dawns on the world as God intends it to be.

Why on Earth do we still believe?

We might be tempted to imagine a golden age of Christianity, a time perhaps not so long ago when it was a foregone conclusion that children and grandchildren would take up the faith of their ancestors, when the church was an unshakable institution at the center of our culture. *What went wrong, we might wonder, that we see fewer and fewer people darkening the doors of our churches? Where have all the faithful gone?*

But, this kind of lament rests on a fallacy. It's true that institutional Christianity is in decline in North America in terms of numbers, that is, in terms of those who formally affiliate with a Christian tradition. It's also true that religious diversity in our communities has increased, to include those who are more confident claiming no religious identity. But, the assumption that faithfulness itself is in jeopardy is a response borne of fear. Just look around at the people sitting near you and you'll see that faith is alive and well, perhaps not in the warm and fuzzy sense of full pews and potlucks in every corner of Christendom, but certainly in the biblical sense of persistent hope in the midst of struggle.

We live in an age of crisis and doubt, and this we have in common with the faithful in every age. Long before Jesus, faithful people grieved the pain and loss that

struck at the heart of life, still holding to the hope that the love of God might overcome them. The writers of our first reading from Habakkuk and our Psalm uphold these two principles of faith, **both honesty in the face of suffering and hope for a life renewed:** “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” Nevertheless, “commit your way to the LORD; put your trust in the LORD, and see what God will do... Be still before the LORD and wait patiently.”

This is the great question facing people of faith in every generation, as one interpreter puts it: “Do we trust the yet unfulfilled promises of the gospel, when so much evidence in our lives seems to contradict them? Can we live our lives accordingly?”¹

If the answer is yes, then why? Why on Earth do we still believe?

In our second reading today from Second Timothy, Paul gives an answer that rings true for me. I hope it does for you, too. “I am reminded of your sincere faith,” he writes to Timothy, the leader of his congregation, “a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” As it turns out, Timothy is a third generation Christian, owing his faith to the women in his family, as many children and grandchildren have throughout the generations.

It makes me think of the women in my life, both known and unknown, who planted the seed of my faith – my maternal grandmother, for instance, who I never had the privilege to meet yet whose crucifix now hangs on the wall of my office. It’s a common symbol in Christian homes, although not as common among Protestants, yet it testifies to my grandmother’s willingness to face the full implications of the incarnation, to honor a God who does not turn away from the world’s pain, but bears it with us. My

¹ Lewis R. Donelson, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 139.

mother gave the crucifix to me, thinking that I might be the one in our family most likely to cherish it.

Who are the Loises and the Eunices in your life? Who are the ancestors, living or departed, women or men, members of your biological family or your chosen family, who've told you the stories, held up the symbols, and modeled the practices of faith for you? I invite you to take a moment in silence to give thanks for them.

And, just as importantly, to whom are you Lois or Eunice? Who relies on you to live with them among God's faithful people, bring them to the word of God and the holy supper, teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer, so that [they] may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace?²

The treasure we have inherited is the same treasure we are called to entrust to others. It's a great responsibility, but it's a responsibility accompanied by a great promise. We do not light the fire of faith ourselves, but "rely on the power of God," as Paul writes to Timothy,

who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to [God's] own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

We are all swept up into God's gracious purpose from the beginning, drawn with both our ancestors and our heirs toward the life that is to come. Richard Rohr summarizes the mystery this way:

² "Holy Baptism," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, 228.

The Risen Christ, who appears in the middle of history, assures us that God is leading us somewhere good and positive, all crucifixions to the contrary. God has been leading us since the beginning of time, but now God includes us in the process of unfolding (Romans 8:28-30). This is the opportunity offered us as humans, and those who ride this Christ train are meant to be the “New Humanity” (Ephesians 2:15b). Christ is both the Divine Radiance at the Beginning Big Bang and the Divine Allure drawing us into a positive future. We are thus bookended in a Personal Love – coming *from* Love, and moving *toward* an ever more inclusive Love.³

Dear church, **that faith persists in our generation is a miracle of grace. And, it’s on account of the faithfulness of our forebears, generations of those who held to “the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus” and passed that promise on to us. The grace that makes faith possible is from of old, still it sustains us in and through our suffering and doubt until light finally dawns on the world as God intends it to be.**

³ *The Universal Christ*, 95.