

Proper 14-C
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St. Stephen's, Spokane

Back in the 1970s when I lived in Kennewick, my doorbell rang one morning, so with a baby in my arms and a toddler clinging to my leg, I answer the door to see two Jehovah's Witnesses standing on my porch. (This wasn't a big surprise. We were a practice neighborhood for the witnesses because a neighbor was their trainer.) A woman began, "I would like to share a word about faith." And I replied, "Do you mean Hebrews 11 – **Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen?**"

Her jaw dropped. She didn't know what to say. It was the first and only time I have ever rendered a Witness speechless. After an awkward silence, they wished us a good day and left. I might add that at that point in my life that was one of maybe three Bible verses that I could share with confidence. But if there were ever one verse to have in your pocket, this would be a great one. I'd like to see it needle-pointed in people's parlors or written in permanent ink on the backs of our hands. (It's probably a bit long for a tattoo, but you never know.)

This is wonderfully basic stuff. Foundational stuff. This is what gets us through the day. And when it was written it was a teaching designed to help shore up a group of Jewish converts in the early church who lived every day with the possibility and the reality of persecution – of suffering for their faith. Important, foundational teaching.

It would be easy to read this and start waxing philosophical about faith. But Hebrews doesn't leave us there. Its author jumps right to a real, human story to make the point. The story, of course, is that of Abraham and Sarah, a bit of which we read in Genesis today. Abraham, you recall, is one of our great spiritual ancestors – part of the early story in Hebrew scripture. He was asked by God to uproot himself and his family from their familiar place to a far-off place where God would have them go. They didn't have a clue what that would be like. God's promise was that they would have offspring – as many as the stars in the sky. And better yet, that God would be with them. “Do not be afraid,” God says. I am your shield.”

Those are very sturdy and assuring words. Words for the journey – the journey of faith.

Abraham's journey with his family is a real life example of a faith story, but it is, I think, also a wonderful metaphor for living our lives. Let's face it. Life often feels like a journey to a place we've never been before. A journey that takes us from the familiar to the unfamiliar. A journey that can sometimes seem vexing or even scary. A lot of the time we don't have as much control as we would like. As much certainty and clarity as we'd like.

John Kavanaugh, a Jesuit at St. Louis University, was thinking a lot about clarity when he spent a month working in Calcutta a few years back. One morning after Mass he met Mother Teresa, who asked him, “What can I do for you?” And he replied, “Pray for me.” She asked him what he wanted her to pray for and he said, “Pray that I have clarity.”

Mother Teresa's answer's answer was simply, “No.” She explained that clarity was the last thing he needed to let go of. When he remarked that he had always longed for the clarity

that she seemed to have, she simply laughed. “I have never had clarity; what I’ve always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust,” she told him.

The question for us is often, How do we trust? How do we live our lives in a way that puts us in the hands of God? Much of the time we’re not all that good at it.

We run into bumps in the road that are huge. Losses in our lives. Illness. Financial challenges. Any number of struggles and changes. World events and tragedies that seem incomprehensible. Sometimes we live in a sea of unanswered questions and nagging doubts. The good news is that we get through them with God’s help. With whatever scrap of faith and trust we muster and also with the shared faith of a community like this one here at St. Stephen’s. We get through those bumpy journeys by sharing them with others who share a common faith. Those who remind us in those times that our own faith feels pretty thin, of what God told Abraham -- that we are not alone.

This Hebrews passage lifts Abraham and Sarah up as role models. They are part of what we know as the great cloud of witnesses - both the ancient heroes of the faith who are celebrated in scripture and history and also our contemporary role models. Maybe you have one of those people in your life. I am in the Church because of some of them.

I grew up in a home that was mostly unchurched – a fairly typical pattern in the Pacific Northwest. We had some brief flirtations Sunday school in a couple of different traditions, but most of my Sunday mornings were spent at home, often watching Rocky and Bullwinkle on television.

When I was in college, my roommate my senior year was a friend named Susan whose family belonged to Trinity Episcopal Church in Everett. Sue had been diagnosed with a kind of cancer that is very treatable today, but was not very treatable in the 1960s. She and her family lived with that reality daily. And they lived it with an incredible hope and grace. An incredible confidence.

Once in a while I'd go home with Sue for a weekend and we attended church with her family. I have to confess that I fell in love with the Episcopal Church's liturgy on those weekends in Everett. It was something that really touched my soul.

But there was something else that touched me even more deeply. It was the way Sue and her family were supported by their church family. That support was rather quiet and subtle, but very strong. No one was denying that she had a serious, possibly terminal illness. There was a strength, a resolve, a steadiness that surrounded them. A deep sense of caring. But most of all, it was a faith and trust— that were clearly shared. They were an anchor. Individually and collectively, they trusted God. Simple as that.

When Sue died at the age of 25, they were there again, surrounding the family with love and living the resurrection faith that is our shared gift.

I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to be in that kind of a community. A community that moved with grace and calm through stormy, difficult times. A community that offered support. A community that was willing to walk along in trust. A community that moved from trust to hope.

The journey through this year has been a challenging one in many ways for our community here at St. Stephen's. In a few weeks we'll pass the anniversary of John Shepard's death, something that all of us have grieved over these past months. Nine other members of this parish have died in the nine months I have served here – most recently Bob Downing, truly one of the great and wise elders of this congregation and Jim Chatham, a young man who died this week in a plane crash in Colorado.. Any number of people have been seriously ill or injured. Other life challenges have touched our community as well.

One thing I know after having shared these months with you here. There is a great cloud of witnesses here. You are people of faith. People who know that God is with us. People of hope. People who live their faith daily and share it generously.

May our faith – the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen – continue to be our strength -- our roots -- our wings—as we journey on.