

Advent 2: FAITH

Isaiah 52:7-10, Luke 1:47-55 [MW20-45]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Kaiwaka and Wellsford, Sunday 06 December 2020

Hebrews chapter 11, verse 11 says:

*Faith means being sure of the things we hope for
and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it*

What's your definition of "faith"?

- do you have one?

How about this:

A pastor was speaking to his people on the relationship between fact and faith. He said, "That you are sitting before me in this church -- is fact. That I am standing here, speaking from this pulpit--is fact. That I believe anyone is listening to me -- is faith!"

Or more seriously, following on from last week, Rubem Alvares says:
Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is to dance to it.

The prophets, who we pay special tribute to in these weeks of Advent

- were responsible for hearing this melody
and dancing to it
- even if all too often they were dancing alone

The prophets' task was one of keeping the faith alive

- often though all they had to work with was a few smoldering embers
the prophets had to keep even these embers from finally being extinguished
- as if that was not enough
they were then supposed to fan these faint embers into a flame
- a flame that would keep people hopeful and warm
a light that would lead people onward
reminding them that God was still with them

Of course alongside this prophets often had to deliver hard messages

- words of judgement and conviction that nobody wanted to hear
in the same way that a parent might say
I'm only disciplining you because I love you: if I didn't care I wouldn't bother
- even in the darkest and most difficult times
the prophets were charged with reassuring people
that God had not forgotten them

Sweeping across Germany at the end of World War II, Allied forces searched farms and houses looking for snipers. At one abandoned house, almost a heap of rubble, searchers with flashlights found their way to the basement. There, on the crumbling wall, a victim of the Holocaust had scratched a Star of David. And beneath it, in rough lettering, the message:

I believe in the sun -- even when it does not shine;
I believe in love -- even when it is not shown;
I believe in God -- even when he does not speak

That was the task of the prophet: to believe in God on behalf of the people

- and to keep them going

This morning Isaiah has a message people have been longing for

- there is someone coming, actually on their way right now who is bringing good news
- a message of salvation and hope
- in fact people are encouraged to break into song not just any old song but joyous song because of what the Lord is about to do!

Another definition says:

Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings to greet the dawn while it is still dark

This new dawn is about to break as a mighty angel comes and speaks to a girl

- a teenager but still a young girl, a child

Frederick Buechner's little book of character sketches of people from the Bible has this to say about the angel Gabriel as he encounters Mary: "She struck him as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of a girl."

That is faith!

- imagine the Lord God, Creator and Sustainer of All placing the future of all creation, of life, the universe and everything in the hands of this teenage girl, Mary
- no wonder Gabriel trembled and the whole of heaven waited with baited breath

There is so much faith surrounding this encounter

- God the Father, Creator and Sustainer had faith to embark on this way of doing things
- the angel Gabriel had faith that his mission was not some fool's errand
- and then there is the young girl herself ...

She was the culmination of the prophets' messages and actions and words over the years

- she was the sign that would vindicate people's faith and yet she too had to have faith, great faith
- faith in the message of the angel
- faith that God was indeed about to act
- faith to allow herself to be the means by which all this came to fruition

Listen to this about a young girl and faith:

In the southern states that summer, the mercury had hung in or near the 90s for five or six straight weeks. On this morning when the sun was blazing a five-year-old daughter came to her father with a little note of anguish in her voice. She told him, "Daddy, it's still awful hot," and asked, "can we go swimming?"

"I had to tell her no," her daddy reported. "It costs about eight dollars to take my family swimming, so we don't go very often. "Some other time," I told her." But that wasn't enough. She wanted to know 'Why not now?' So I explained that we just didn't have the money for it."

Well, to the little girl that was a good explanation but a poor solution. She promptly took the matter to a Higher Court. "I'm going to ask God," she said. And then, with just a tiny pinch of defiance, off she rushed to her bedroom.

Intrigued, her daddy followed on tiptoe and stood just outside her door, carefully out of sight, to hear what she would ask of God. And this is what he heard: "God, it's awful hot down here today, just awful hot. And I want to go swimming. But they charge a lot of money, and my daddy can't take us because he hasn't got that much. So will you please do something? Thank you, God. Amen."

Oh, the love in that father's voice when he told what the little girl did next: She put on her bathing suit. Then she got a towel. And then, towel draped around her neck, she headed for the front porch, announcing as she went that she was going outside to wait for God to do something.

She'd just taken her seat on the porch steps, elbows on knees and chin in hand, when the telephone rang. Her mother answered it. The caller was the wife in a couple they knew, but did not know well. They were interesting and likeable acquaintances, but not yet close friends. "We've been wanting to know you folks better," she told the little girl's mother. "Today's another scorcher, and we wondered whether you'd like to come over to the club with us for some swimming?"

"Oh, we'd love to!" the mother replied. "But how soon are you going? I've been lazy this morning, and there are a few things I have to do before ... "

"Oh, no problem!" the caller said. "We're not ready yet either. I didn't even think of it until a few minutes ago."

The prophets, like Isaiah, kept the message alive

- they had their towels at the ready!

Mary allowed faith to give life to the message

- Mary put on her bathing suit and waited on the porch for 'God to do something'!

Just listen to what Mary says as she waits in faith, and hope

- we've heard it so often maybe we kind of gloss over it

listen again, with fresh ears, to what she says

- this is from *The Message*

[PP Slides]

*I'm bursting with God-news;
I'm dancing the song of my Saviour God.
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—
 I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
 the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
His mercy flows in wave after wave
 on those who are in awe before him.
He bared his arm and showed his strength,
 scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
 pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
 the callous rich were left out in the cold.
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;
 he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
It's exactly what he promised,
 beginning with Abraham and right up to now.*

Have faith, my children, says our Heavenly Father
- have faith
 I will be with you as I have never been before!!!