

“LIVING THE PROMISE”

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-18; John 3:1-17

February 17, 2008

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When I am facing challenging situations, I usually turn to the scriptures and to some of my favorite theologians to help me. One of those people is Henri Nouwen, who touches me because he speaks of his own wrestling with God and he writes clearly, in words that are accessible...

Nouwen: “Each day holds a surprise. But only if we expect it can we see, hear, or feel it when it comes to us. Let’s not be afraid to receive each day’s surprise, whether it comes to us as sorrow or as joy. It will open a new place in our hearts, a place where we can welcome new friends and celebrate more fully our shared humanity.” (*Bread for the Journey*)

These last few weeks have certainly proven the truth of those words—that each new day holds a surprise. Yet it seems that for this congregation many of those surprises have been of the type that come to us as sorrow, rather than as joy. We have been shaken as we face our own mortality and, indeed, our shared humanity, as we consider the illnesses and conditions of young people, like Jessie, and older, long-standing members of this congregation such as Verlyne and Larry and Jean. We ache with them, we want to help, and we each do our own reflecting on what it means in our lives and theirs. Additionally, each of us have our own family members and friends outside of this congregation, even throughout the world, whose conditions cry out to us. Lent feels very heavy, indeed, and very much with us this year, as Ryan mentioned.

As I have lived with the scriptures this week, I found myself realizing that my responsibility today is not to give you any new answers. My job is not to tell you anything new that you don’t already know. My job is remind us all of the call we have from God as people on this journey of faith. And to remind you of the gifts and promises we have all been given, to serve one another and to help us all along this road of life. Above all, it is to help us hear again the promises which God gives us, over and over, and which people throughout the ages recorded of their experience of those promises, in scripture. We are called to live in the light of those promises even when we can only mouth the words and faintly hear a tune in our hearts.

Look at Abraham, in the story told in Genesis this morning. Abraham was 75 years old; time to be winding down his activities we would think. Particularly since he didn’t have a family, he must have been a bit doubtful that God cared about him at all. But God had other ideas. Big ideas. And big promises. And, unlike Jonah and some other reluctant members of God’s crew, Abraham, we are told, believed God and followed the promise. He set out, not knowing what was ahead. He left what he knew, what was safe. Abram shows us that faith is not self-confidence; it is a matter of living the promise, moving ahead even when we can’t see the way. Abraham’s faith, Paul tells the Romans centuries later, was reckoned to him as righteousness—not his works, but his faith. “Hoping against hope” he believed he would be the father of many nations.

Hoping against hope. How often do we do that? I suspect that many of us have been praying in that manner recently. Something to the effect of, “God, I know what this all looks like. I don’t

like it. I don't understand it. I don't know what to do next. I want you to fix it. But at the least, help me do something to make things better." I know that many of you have more disciplined prayer lives than I do. This Lent I have found myself praying in more ways, more times every day, than I have in some time. Life itself has structured my Lenten observances far better than my well-thought-out plan. Not unusual, is it? Our sense of control is illusory, but it makes us feel secure.

I turn again to some of Henri Nouwen's wisdom, about the challenge of control and the role of prayer:

"It takes courage to move away from the safe place into the unknown, even when we know that the safe place offers false safety and the unknown promises us a saving intimacy with God. We realize quite well that giving up the familiar and reaching out with open arms towards him who transcends all our mental grasping and clinging makes us very vulnerable. Somewhere we sense that, although holding on to our illusions might lead to a truncated life, the surrender in love leads to the cross..."

"It is a sign of spiritual maturity when we can give up our illusory self-control and stretch out our hands to God. But it would be just another illusion to believe that reaching out to God will free us from pain and suffering. Often, indeed, it will take us where we rather would not go. But we know that without going there we will not find our life. "Anyone who loses his life...will find it" (Matt. 16.25), Jesus says, reminding us that love is purified in pain.

Prayer, therefore, is far from sweet and easy. Being the expression of our greatest love, it does not keep pain away from us. Instead, it makes us suffer more since our love for God is a love for a suffering God and our entering into God's intimacy is an entering into the intimacy where all of human suffering is embraced in divine compassion. To the degree that our prayer has become the prayer of our heart, we will love more and suffer more, we will see more light and more darkness, more grace and more sin, more of God and more of humanity. To the degree that we have descended into our heart and reached out to God from there, solitude can speak to solitude, deep to deep and heart to heart. It is there where love and pain are found together." (*Reaching Out*)

This solitude of prayer has to move us to be with and for one another. Left to ourselves, we feel alone and even with the promises of God, and the assurances of the Psalmist who reminds us that God will not let us stumble and that God never ceases to be with us, it can be hard to truly believe that, when pain or fear surrounds us. That is why God calls each of us, by name, to be a part of Christ's body, rather than to be alone, to be members one of another.

Take a look, again, at your bulletin; at the bottom of the second page you find yourself named: Ministers: all the members of the church. Indeed, I would include nonmembers, as well, who are led hear. What does it mean to be a minister? Henri Nouwen says:

"...Ministry means the ongoing attempt to put one's own search for God, with all the moments of pain and joy, despair and hope, at the disposal of those who want to join this search but do not know how. Therefore, ministry in no way is a privilege. Instead, it is the core of the Christian

life. No Christian is a Christian without being a minister.” (*Creative Ministry*)

Therefore, ministry means to wrestle with our fears and our hopes, together. To sit together in silence, to share tears of joy and tears of sorrow together. To recognize that at any given time, some of us can't find any words for prayer and don't even dare sit in silence alone, while others are given prayers to speak and presence to give to others. This is what I hear in the promises made to us in the scripture. God is present, as we gather, one or two; or all together in this place.

How do we hold the faith for one another when it is invisible or out of reach? Take a moment to reflect on your own life; close your eyes, if that helps.

When have you felt that utter darkness, that pit of the stomach anguish that leaves you wondering whether you can take a deep breath? Perhaps you have received word of the death of a loved one, or news such as we received in the last two weeks, of Jessie and Verlyne. For some of you it was receiving your own diagnosis of cancer or a chronic illness. Perhaps you have been laid-off or fired from a job, the news coming as a shock with no warning. You have been through that emptiness of a miscarriage. A relationship which you have invested yourself and your vulnerability in is ripped apart and you know you will never be able to love or trust again. God's absence is all you feel...

And yet, you are here today. Somehow you have been able to put one foot down, and the next, and you have been able to believe again, even if just a shred of belief, that leads you to this community. God is truly in those minute wisps of faith that bind us together, amid the pain and doubt and questions. God's promise is not that we will always believe without question, or that life will be easy as soon as we accept Jesus Christ into our lives, as some would seem to tell us. The stories of the Bible show us that all of God's people are human—they wrestle with faith. They hope against hope. When everything would tell us it is useless to believe, somehow we find a way. Someone touches us on the shoulder. Someone says, “Hey, I believe in you...” “I'm here for you...” “I see God in you and with you even if you can't, and I will be here until you can see it again...”

I can attest to the truth that you know how to do that. When I was in junior high I felt my call to ministry. Yet when I was a freshman in high school my mother died of cancer and I was left in that darkness of unbelief. I was blessed with people at my home church who sat with me. And some of you were the people who continued to be with me as I wrestled with those issues when I came to OSU and this church. You are truly ministers one with another. But it can be very hard when we feel we need to say something, but nothing fits.

When I sit with someone who is in that deep place of not being able to believe, I can't make them believe. Nothing you or I say will give them faith. But what I can say is, “I believe God is here in the midst of this, and I will hold your faith for you until you can take it back again. I will be here for you, as long that takes. And I love you, just as you are in the midst of the pain and doubt.”

I will be eager to read what Liz writes on her theological journey through this time. We are blessed to have someone so articulate and so open to her own processes, who is willing to share that journey with us. Our role is to receive that, to learn from it, and to know that our faith and our prayer make a difference, for her and for us.

May the promises of God live in you and sustain you as you minister with one another in every day ahead. Amen.