

“THE BELIEVING COMMUNITY”

Psalm 133; John 20:19-31, Acts 4:32-35

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I cannot remember a time when God and church were not a part of my life. In fact, one of my very earliest memories is of kindergarten Sunday school, coloring in a picture of Almighty God, majestic on His throne, His long white beard flowing into His sumptuous robes. Now I realize in these days it's not a very theologically correct image, but for me, as a child of the 1950s, it worked just fine then. I knew this God was powerful and benevolent. He watched over me and protected me; and though He expected certain behavior from me and all his children, He was always loving. I colored His throne royal purple, and His robes red and blue with great relish, and all seemed right with the world.

My mother taught Sunday school, and she had a children's story Bible. As soon as I learned to read, I loved that book. I would read it for hours. All these great tales of faithful people and miraculous acts. Great heroes like Moses the nobody calling out the great Pharaoh of Egypt; young David besting the giant Goliath; and, my personal favorite, Sampson, muscles bulging, pulling down the pillars of the Philistine temple. I loved those stories. Through some innate sense, or the good teaching of church school teachers, or the grace of God, I never doubted as a child that these were my stories, my inheritance, stories not just about long ago and far away, but about me and the possibilities for my life. The more I read of them, the more a part of me they became.

In middle school, high school, into college, the stories lost their fascination for me, but that was ok, because there was the community of the church. Our church youth group was of the unconventional type. We would gather on Saturday mornings to be bussed down to Los Angeles Country General hospital, now USC Medical Center. They were so short staffed at the public hospital that we high school volunteers fed babies and stocked treatment rooms, washed beds, and transported patients. We did real work for real reasons and saw life much less privileged than our own. We formed a folk choir that sang all over the West; we protested the Vietnam war; and we talked for hours about whatever was on our minds. When I went off to college at Yale, I did manage to pull myself out of bed and make it to 11:00 a.m. church (just barely) a lot of Sunday mornings; through my years in New Haven, I got to hear most of the great preachers of the English-speaking world at that time. But worship and the stories still were secondary to me at that point in my life. It was the community of the Chaplain's office: Thursday afternoon wine and cheese, and planning college-wide fasts and educational events to draw attention to world hunger. Church people asked questions. Church people did things. Church people cared. So I stayed a church person.

It was in seminary that I re-engaged with the stories of our faith, this time with a kind of historical, and literary and intellectual probing that took me much further than my childhood sense of safety and goodness, miracles, and the possibility of ordinary heroism. I read and reread texts and commentaries, learned Hebrew and Greek, experienced first hand the challenges of translation and the context out of which our biblical literature was written. I learned that really smart and faithful people disagreed on important meanings of things. I learned that you could read the same old story five times and on the six time see something new. I fell in love again with the basic text of my faith but with an arsenal of new tools to probe and understand it. That love affair continued pretty much unabated quite frankly until last winter when Jessie got so sick, and God and I were not so much on speaking terms. The stories, when I read them, mostly kept their silent distance.

But, again, that was ok, I realize now in retrospect, because when the stories seemed to abandon me or I abandoned them, there was the kindness and support of all of you: you, and my former church in Seattle, and even members of my first church in Duluth, who sent me cards and letters and care packages and gave me space and helped me do what I needed to do. The stories didn't work right then, but the community held, a different but still compelling witness to God's continued presence with the world.

There is a reason I share all this with you this morning—not because I think it's important that you know my faith story, but because I'm pretty sure my story is not so different from others. Our gospel reading this morning is the tale of one of Jesus' first disciples, the one we have come to call "doubting Thomas." Thomas, who happened to be absent when the Risen Christ came to visit the disciples. Thomas, who when his friends clustered around him excitedly shouting, "We have seen the Lord!" was not thrilled, but rather distressed by the news. He had missed the big event. In envy and frustration, he responded to his friends, "Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Thomas has gotten a bad rap over the years. Good Christians are outwardly snide about his lack of faith, while inwardly, I would bet that most of us are applauding him! Who here wouldn't like to be as demanding as he? Who would not prefer direct proof of Easter's power? Who among us would not have an easier time of this journey we call faith if we could have one clear miraculous manifestation for ourselves?

There are, I know, a small few in the ranks of the faithful who do have an immediate and unshakeable certainty about the reality of God and the power of the Christian message for their lives. For them it is as if they have put their fingers in the mark of the nails; I admit I envy them their certitude. But the story of Thomas was included in John's gospel to inform us that even in John's time, such experience was rare. Jesus's last words to Thomas are not really spoken to Thomas himself, but to those of us not in the upper room that night: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe." That's us, or at least most of us. John wants to teach us, to assure us that direct experience is and will always

be the exception and not the rule for the believing community. Most of us will never gain the unshakeable certainty of immediate tangible knowledge. Instead we rely on the power, the more subtle witness of these long ago stories that are our spiritual legacy, stories that through repetition and reflection become our stories, and, alongside of them, the living manifestation of the body of Christ which is the gathered community of the church. Through these two agents, we get glimpses of the holy; through them, we make sense of right and wrong and neighbor and discipleship; through them we find the will to live as if we are sure that there is a God in heaven, and love is more powerful than death, and there is work for us to do in Christ's name while we have strength and breath.

Stories and community: sometimes they seem a frail tether to the promised glories of heaven. Even a well-trained Bible lover like myself, I know that some of the stories in this book are impossible for us to accept or even fathom. And the community of the church: well, there's a human history full of blemishes and false starts, and occasionally downright evil. But for most of us, that's what it comes down to. What brings us to the church, what keeps us in the church, is some combination of the tug of the stories on our hearts and the pull of the living community in our lives. Somehow, through the grace of God, they are enough to hold us close and keep us praying prayers and singing hymns, lobbying for the homeless and caring for creation, returning over and over again to the church which is become our spiritual home.

A recent Pew foundation study reports that 70% of liberal Christians are uneasy that they don't believe enough, are less than certain, hold doubts about important matters of faith. Seventy percent—that's a whole lot of us out there insecure about our faith. But I would contend this morning, much of that has to do with our misguided sense of what faith should be like. We want to believe like those who have seen. We crave that certainty. But we haven't seen, and our fingers will probably never trace the marks in the hands of the Risen Christ. So the words of Jesus in today's gospel should come as good news to all of us in that 70%. You know what Jesus calls us: uncertain, questioning, uneasy Christians that we are. Jesus calls us blessed. Blessed are you who have trouble with the Bible and continue to struggle with it still! Blessed are you who get exasperated sometimes with the imperfection of the church, but don't hold yourself above it! Blessed are you who doubt and yet come to worship anyway! Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Thanks be to God. Amen.