

REFLECTIONS
August 11, 2019
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Joshua Nolen
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

A reading from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 1 starting at verse 11:

11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

12 When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more;

13 bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

15 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

AMEN

I will hide my eyes from you? even though you make many prayers, I will not listen? your hands are full of blood? That's kind of rough, right?

A few weeks ago, after agreeing to do a reflection I read this passage and immediately thought I'd pass on it and pick something else. But then I read the other lessons, and none of them struck me like the way this one did from Isaiah. But I wasn't sure why the passage stuck with me or what I was going to say.

And then last weekend happened.

El Paso.

Dayton.

And when I went back to Isaiah, they were all I could think about.

even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood... learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Isaiah is essentially telling us that "thoughts and prayers" are not enough. Praying, going to church, rituals, tweeting, are not enough.

God is calling for action.

And it's *us* that need to act.

Isaiah and the other prophets in the Old Testament don't spend their time criticizing non-believers, their message is for people of faith.

It's not enough to simply say *you* need to do better; *we* need to do better.

Faith is a call to action.

In the church, we often fall back on a faith that focuses on performance, on liturgy, on going to church, on following traditions, on "thoughts and prayers".

But did you hear what Isaiah wrote:

New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me ... seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Here God, through Isaiah, is saying that we often let the details of *doing* church – prayers, Sabbath, festivals, convocation, Sunday services, Session meetings – get in the way of *being* church – seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan and the widow.

We often miss that faith is that call to action.

And let me say at this point, I certainly realize the dangers in the person who typically works on Sunday, coming to church to share a reflection that says the church needs to be more active.

So let me be the first to admit, I love *doing* church.

What do I mean?

I love Sabbath rituals, calls of convocation, solemn assemblies. Honestly, I love Session meetings, worship meetings, Pastor Nominating Committee meetings. A lot of times, I think that meetings don't really get good until you pass the 90-minute mark.

I would have loved to have been in Judah and Jerusalem during the days of Isaiah and debated the relative value of sacrifices between bulls and lambs and goats. I could have been in an all-day Session retreat on what the best incense smell would have been to be used in the temple.

And I've done it.

I've spent countless hours in meetings discussing communion bread, hymn selection, debating various translations of the Lord's Prayer, focusing on the performance of worship, so that not a single moment is unscripted.

So I get it.

I get being so wrapped in doing church, that we lose sight of being church. Of putting on the best performance, that we forget the real reason we're here.

Faith as a call to action.

When I joined the church nine years ago, we read Marcus Borg's Heart of Christianity.

In the book, Borg talks about the meaning of faith, and points out that what we in English translate as "faith" is actually four different things.

The first is what Borg calls "assent" or "belief", which is the type of faith my childhood focused on. What you might call orthodoxy.

The other three types of faith are not "head" focused, but "heart" focused. And are more historically representative of the understanding of faith in Biblical times.

Borg translates these as trust, faithfulness, and vision – a way of seeing and being.

These types of faith are not concerned with orthodoxy, but with orthopraxy. Instead of a focus on right belief, it's a focus on right actions.

Faith as a call to action.

Many of us helping lead the service this morning are part of the Pastor Nominating Committee, and I've realized that while we've reviewed resumes, statements of faith, and conducted interviews, yes, what someone believes is important, but what someone does because of that belief is even more important.

Faith in action.

Isaiah's words are reflected in a familiar passage in Micah.

What does the Lord require of you?

Not thoughts and prayers. Not meetings and rituals.

But action.

Seeking justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God and with one another.

AMEN

Dave Smith
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.

3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.

9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old--and Sarah herself was barren--because he considered him faithful who had promised.

12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth,

14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return.

16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

According to the New International Version this reading is about "persevering in faith under pressure". The pressure being felt by the congregants of the time came from persecution – public ridicule, seizure of property, imprisonment. Pressures in our modern lives – feelings of self-worth, achievement, addiction, loss of health, loss of independence, loss of loved ones, seeking safety, feeling abandoned and alone -- make perseverance as relevant today as it was then.

I was surprised that this reading called to me because faith is a stumbling block in my relationship with religion. I was trained and made a career in science. Faith seems incompatible with science. As Darwin said (which is engraved on the wall of the Shepherd College science building) "we [scientists] are not here concerned with hopes and fears, only with the truth as far our reason permits us to discover it"

But faith and science claim the same territory. Note the third line of the reading, “By faith we understand ... that what is seen was made from things that are not visible”. Also through science we understand that the material derives from the invisible: carbon molecules, atoms, quarks, Higgs boson (whatever that is), evolution, the big bang. The blueprint for our bodies lies hidden in the nucleotide code arranged on the double helix of the DNA molecule. The genetic blueprint constrains how our bodies develop and work. Great diversity is encoded in the genetic blueprint - both beauty and tragedy. The genetic instructions that switched off the rod and cone cells in my wife Mary’s retina and blocked the nerves leading to her inner ears are written as a sort of grammatical error in her DNA – a misspelling of sorts. Do I believe that God, as the ultimate copy editor, will or can correct the genetic typo and revise the instructions? No, I do not. How can I have faith in a God that would make that mistake by design, or a God that would withhold correcting such a cruel mistake?

Marcus Borg in “The Heart of Christianity” teaches that faith is not limited to belief but includes trust, faithfulness, and vision.

- Faith as Assensus, or belief, is a matter of the head. We affirm weekly that “In life and in death we belong to God”. Collective affirmation of faith can unify a congregation. However, faith as a set of right beliefs can separate and divide people leading to claims of righteousness and rejection of others. Faith as belief is not what calls me to church. Thankfully, the other meanings of faith are matters of the heart.
- Faith as Fiducia, or trust, is like floating on a deep ocean, which begins by letting go. From our Brief Statement of Faith: “We trust in Jesus Christ... We trust in God... We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor...”.
- Faith as Fidelitas, or faithfulness, calls us to attend to our relationship with God and with each other by committing to love God with all our heart mind soul and strength and love our neighbor as our self. We have been told (Micah 6:8) what faithfulness requires -- to be kind, to act justly, and to walk humbly through this world.
- Faith as Visio, or vision, is to see through the fog of the unknown. Science, which can’t truly be separate from God, has given us the vision of discovery, knowledge, and prediction. The Dalai Lama said: “Spirituality and science are different but complementary investigative approaches with the same greater goal, of seeking the truth”. In Borg’s view, faith as vision connects us to the metaphor for the unfathomable God. Similarly, science connects us to the scientific explanations, that is the empirical metaphors, for the unfathomable Universe.

Can we know the Universe or God with certainty through either science or faith? There is an allure to certainty – a sirens song. We believe with certainty as a defense against an unknown future like a Pascal’s wager inspired insurance policy against eternal damnation. But as Neils Bohr, the Danish physicist, supposedly said, “It’s difficult to make predictions, especially about the future”. Alas, uncertainty is unavoidable inspiring fear, anxiety, and pressure. The kind of pressure that causes people to desire a better country and a new Homeland. Perhaps by faith alone, “Abraham set out ...not knowing where he was going”, but sometimes it’s hard to know which way to turn or roads at every turn are blocked, and we feel frozen in place.

The uncertain future loomed large when I gazed at the son in my arms twenty some years ago. There was a little song by Harry Nilsson that I sang to Eric, my son, when he was a little tike. I faithfully sang a snippet: “Way out on the ocean, Far beyond the seven seas, There's a tiny little boat. Faith is keeping her afloat, And a tiny little skipper with his

worn and tattered coat, You see the law of the ocean, Says you shall never fail, Use your heart as a rudder, Faith as a compass, And a blanket for a sail.”

We are way out on an ocean sailing beyond what we can know. The way forward is uncertain. Our nation is in uncharted and dangerous waters. Events in our lives arise as sudden storms mocking our carefully charted course; we struggle to weather the storm. Some storms threaten to overwhelm us; some do. We hope to persevere, reorient ourselves, and chart a new course. Faith, in its many forms, is keeping us afloat.

Dear Life Giver, Mother-Father of the Cosmos, Help us use love as our rudder and faith as our compass. Allow faith to open our hearts to your amazing grace; help us to persevere and to see the way forward to build a better country. Let your grace fill our sail and lead us home. So may it be. Amen