

This is a true story. One morning, a man – let’s name him Mr. Smith – tried to start his car parked in front of his home. To his dismay, he discovered that the car would not start because its battery had been stolen. He notified the police, who duly wrote a report on the incident and advised Mr. Smith to inform his insurance company. Mr. Smith then went out and bought another car battery.

A few mornings later, when Mr. Smith walked outside, he discovered a brand-new battery had been placed on the hood of his automobile. Attached to the battery was an envelope containing a note of apology. The note read: “Due to a medical emergency in the middle of the night this past week, it was necessary for me to take your car battery. Instead of waking you at that time of the night, I chose to explain my actions later. Please accept this replacement battery, and the gift enclosed, as a small token of my gratitude.” The note was unsigned. The envelope also contained two expensive tickets to an out-of-town theatre performance scheduled for the following week.

Mr. Smith was ecstatic. His faith in human nature had been restored, and understandably so. The following week, he and his wife went out for dinner, then attended the theatre using the two tickets he had received from his unknown benefactor. The Smiths returned home, tired but happy from their night on the town. They opened the front door and discovered that their home had been burgled. Just about everything of value – silverware, jewelry, furniture, everything – was gone! It was immediately obvious to the Smiths that the mysterious thief of their car battery had tricked them into leaving their home unattended, making it easy pickings for the thief to return and clean them out. This time, the police report commented that “The Smiths do not expect to receive another note from the thief.”

As Jesus said in today’s gospel reading from Luke, “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.” Jesus’ purpose in making that observation was not to caution us about securing our homes against thieves. Instead, he went on to say, “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Which was one way of saying that none of us knows for certain when Christ will return and we will meet Christ, but it is certain that one day we will meet Christ. I interpret that as being the day of our death. Therefore, Jesus is telling us always to be ready for that day because we cannot know for certain when that day will arrive. How much faith have you in the promise that when this life has ended, you will see Christ?

I would like us to spend some time this morning thinking about the strength of our faith in God. As we read in this morning’s first lesson from the book of Hebrews, faith is defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” On a scale of one-to-ten, with ten being strong and one being weak, how do you rank your faith in God? I realize that the strength of our faith probably fluctuates depending upon the always changing circumstances of our life. Nevertheless, for today at least, where does your faith in God register on that one-to-ten scale?

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews, from which we read a small portion this morning, is sometimes called the ‘Biblical Heroes Hall of Fame.’ In it we read about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah, and the rest of the chapter goes on to name Abel, Noah, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets, and a host of other unnamed biblical figures all of whom, despite their very human flaws, shared one thing in common: their great faith in God. All those ancient people mentioned in Hebrews had faith that God could be trusted, and God’s promises concerning the ultimate outcomes of their lives would be realized.

Their faith in God allowed them to believe in that which they could not see, and to believe some things to be true even where the evidence was not sufficient to support that belief definitively. They all pressed on through life’s challenges, hopeful for a better tomorrow. When they died, they were still faithfully trusting in the eventual coming of God’s kingdom even though it had not yet fully arrived during their own lifetime.

I have heard it said that perfectionism kills faith because we are naturally inclined to want guarantees. We want to know the ending even before we begin because we don’t want to fail. But remember, even if faith is not perfect, it perseveres. Faith in God is far more about trust than results. It is about trying

and trying again. Faith is belief backed up by our actions, because believing and doing are the two essential components of faith. And faith in God is never, ever, to be trivialized.

This conversation took place in a coffee shop. A woman with a loud voice revealed how frustrated she had become while trying to find a parking spot nearby. She described how, in her annoyance, she prayed, “OK God, I give up. You find me a parking place or I’m going home!” Then, as she drove around the block for the fourth time a parking spot opened right in front of the coffee shop. Her friend, a rather quiet woman, smiled and shared how she had been praying for weeks for her friend who had received a bad prognosis for her recurring illness. She had spoken to her friend earlier that morning and learned that the doctors now were confident that the friend would recover.

What are your thoughts about the faithfulness of each of those two women, as revealed by the things for which they prayed? Both women were sincere in praying, but only the woman who asked for healing for her friend knew what faith in God and prayer is for – and it is not for finding parking places and other such petty needs. As I said, faith in God is never, ever, to be trivialized

I don’t know if you are aware of this, but the Letter to the Hebrews from which we read was written to a group of people who were thinking about giving up on the church and giving up on faith in God. The letter was written to people who had made sacrifices for their faith, who had even endured suffering, but they had grown weary. All they could see was that the path immediately in front of them appeared too hard to keep following. They felt let down by God, and they were thinking about giving up on God. They were thinking about transferring their trust to someone or something other than God.

The letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage people not to give up. In the same way, Christians throughout the ages ever since have encouraged others whose faith is wavering not to give up.

The mistake we sometimes make is thinking that faith in God is an accomplishment, something we achieved only by our own efforts, and sometimes even through gritted teeth. Instead, we should think of Christian faith as something that is life-giving and empowering that we are free to accept openly and effortlessly.

Our role in becoming faithful people has been compared to being a passenger on an airplane. Some people who travel by plane are confident flyers. Others are not. But here is the thing: to fly, all you must do is get on the plane. That is your responsibility. Get on the plane and behave kindly to the people around you. You can be a relaxed passenger or a nervous passenger, but all that really matters in that situation is the ability of the pilot. You can be the passenger who is utterly undaunted by rough midflight air turbulence, or you can be the passenger who hunkers down and nervously eats the little packet of pretzels that the flight attendants hand out fearing it might be your last meal, but what really matters on your flight is the training and experience of the pilot. The pilot is the same for the calm and reassured passengers as for the nervous and fearful passengers. The difference is, passengers who place their trust in the pilot have a much better experience during the journey.

Similarly, the person who confidently places their trust and faith in God will have a much better experience during their journey through life.

We do not need to look very long or hard to find all kinds of evidence of the power of Christian faithfulness in God. We see that there is faith that reconciles and rebuilds broken relationships, even after heartbreak. There is faith that endures and carries people through incredible physical suffering and pain. There is faith that allows people to give up addictions and ask for help. There is faith that makes people keep showing up to care for people others have left behind. There is faith that asks for forgiveness, faith that heals, faith that changes lives. Even a little bit of faith, even a little bit of seeking and acknowledging God can lead to hope and joy and strength and peace and a future we cannot yet see, but of which we can be assured and confident.

One final thing. Phyllis Theroux, who is an American author, tells of the time she took a written exam as part of the application process for a government job. A few questions were included on the test that clearly were intended to weed out any of the ‘crazies’ who applied. One of those questions read, “Do you think that you are a special agent of God?” At first, Theroux was paralyzed by the question. Although she would not normally have used the term “special agent” to describe her relationship with God, she did indeed believe that God was a real presence in her life and had a purpose for her. But she was afraid of hurting her prospects for getting the job if she answered “yes,” to the question. Needing the job more than she needed to be perceived as a ‘crazy,’ Theroux chose caution over faithfulness and wrote down “no” as her answer.

What would you have done? In a similar situation, how might you answer the question, “Do you think that you are a special agent of God?” Or to express it less dramatically, “do you have faith that God has a purpose for you?” If you do, what has that purpose been to this point in your life? What do you faithfully imagine might be God’s purpose for you in days to come?

As for today, on a scale of one-to-ten, how do you rate your faith in God? **Amen.**

9th Sunday after Pentecost

7 August 2022

Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming