

August 11th, 2019

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-13a

Pastor Katya Brodbeck - Powell United Methodist Church

“We Live by Faith”

We’ve all had days when our faith was just not there. Self-doubt and uncertainty about our place in this world would capture our whole-being as if there is nothing else in the world that matters in the moment. We sit and let our mind tell us, “I am not good enough” “I do not do anything good in this world.” “I am worthless.” “I just want to quit.” This cassette tape (for those who know what that is) is set to repeat all the awful things that our mind can come up with about ourselves. These moments, or days, could be simply triggered by an Instagram or Facebook post of a friend who is having a really good time travelling, or a friend who got a new job or worse started their own business. Or we found out that someone made a team and we did not. So, you know what kinds of days and moments I am talking about.

Now, I must pause here and say that to have days like these once in a while is normal, but if any of anyone here and anyone whom you know seems to have a lot of days like these, perhaps, it would be wise to talk to a doctor about it or someone you really trust. There might be a deeper underlying condition that causes these self-doubt days. And there is help and support available. And even here we have a list of local mental health support providers.

So, back to those days. I had one of those days this past Thursday. That morning I saw on Facebook that someone with whom I went to seminary wrote a book. Then I realized that my Sermon link has not gotten an amount of views that it usually gets and it did not hit even close to the number that Larry usually got last week. So, these things and the heaviness of the week with the two mass shootings were enough to trigger in me and set to play and repeat the “favorites” in Katya’s self-doubt album: “Am I making any difference in this world?” “I am not good enough.” “It seems like I am not doing anything good.” “Is this faith thing helping anyone?” and on and on...And that was my sermon-writing day! Good luck, Katya! So there I sat, aware of the scripture passage and how the scripture talks about Abraham, I was wondering, if Abraham had days like these too?

So, kids, Ms Rebecca, told me that you just talked about Abraham and his life in your Sunday School class. And this is so wonderful that you came prepared! But not all of us here in Ms Rebecca’s Sunday School class. But I thought for the sake of our adults in the room, how about we try to remember who Abraham was and why we name him as a father of our faith together. So, we learn in Genesis 12 that God calls Abraham to go to a land that God would give to him, and God would bless him, his family and all the generations after him, and that all nations on earth would be blessed by Abraham. And what did Abraham do, kids? Yes, he went. He took his wife, Sarah, and all his possessions and went on the journey. I am imagining if in Abraham’s times they had Facebook or Instagram. Abraham’s post would be: Guys, just got an

amazing message from God that I would receive land and many nations on earth will be blessed by me. Totally unexpected but so great! So, do not expect any posts from me, I will be traveling and will check in from time to time to let you know I am safe if we'll have service. Send your positive thoughts and prayers. #whengodcalls #whatamigetmyselfinto

Now, one thing that was really puzzling to Sarah and Abraham is that they did not have children. So they could not understand how Abraham would have descendants if they had no kids. And I would imagine Abraham had those days that I described earlier. He left his home for something that he could not even imagine and perceive in his head. He had never seen this land and he had never had a child of his own and in his old age he could not imagine having any. Abraham was human, after all, and for humans, doubts and uncertainty are a very natural thing. I would imagine Abraham would question himself, would question God. 'What was I thinking? Why did I think that God can choose me for this great mission? Who I am? I have no kids of my own, I am too old. I am worthless.' However, Abraham continued to interact with God, he continued to respond to God.

So after Abraham left and was on the journey for some time, lots of things happened. He came to Canaan. God appeared to Abraham again. Abraham asked God his question about his descendants. What God did was quite amazing. God took Abraham outside and showed him the stars in the night sky and told him how Abraham would have as many descendants as the number of stars in the sky. And Abraham believed him. And God made a covenant with Abraham. God said that he would fulfill this promise and that Abraham would have children and that Abraham's family would have the land that God had promised to him. And Abraham believed him again. We know from the Bible that again and again and again, Abraham continued to trust God. No wonder the Jewish people see Abraham as the father of faith, as a role model of how to trust God in our lives.

So what we together remember about Abraham, all of that and even more, the whole story, the original readers of our text this morning, this letter to the Hebrews, they knew it by heart. They knew exactly who Abraham was and were familiar with his response to God and his faith. You see, the original recipients were Jewish Christians, hence the name of the letter, and they were having a crisis of faith, faith in God, in this new thing that they got involved themselves into called following Jesus Christ. One of the commentaries says, "The community to whom Hebrews was written had undergone great hardship, including public ridicule, confiscation of property, and imprisonment. Because of the pressures put upon the community, some had rejected their faith, others avoided worship." This situation with faith and doubt in this early Jewish Christian community reminds me of what is happening in the UMC. The pressure on lots of people across the denomination, the doubts about the future of the UMC. Even in Christianity in general here in our country, the public denounces the power of prayer when it comes to tragedies. With staff and other groups this week, we talked about that and Larry mentioned it in his encouraging letter to us at the beginning of this week. Enough with prayers, we want action, we hear.

So back to the Hebrews letter. The author of Hebrews reminds the readers who are stuck in doubt and uncertainty, about the faith of their forefathers and mothers. The author tries to evoke the great stories of Jewish faith to help them remember that the faith of the heroes of faith is real and an amazing inspiration. In the previous chapter, chapter 10, verse 23 says, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” And the key to the faith of the faithful in the Hebrew Bible is the faithfulness of God to them and God’s love towards them. Their faith was always a response to God’s initiation and God’s love. The whole thing of faith always starts with God. Then we respond, then God responds. It is a back and forth between God and God’s people. Just like Abraham did. Call, response, call, response.

The Hebrews author states, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen. I so love the word “assurance” that I opened up the Greek version of the text to look up the meaning of this word in Greek. Well, to my disappointment, in the Greek text, there is no word “assurance.” So I was not reassured. There is a strange word there instead. And this word is “substance.” So it can be translated as faith is a Substance of things hoped for. That is important. A lot of times we, Christians, and those who are not, think of faith is this intellectual activity, something very mystical and strange, that sort of comes out of nothing. But this text talks about a substance. Our faith does not just appear out of thin air. Our faith has substance: it is God’s love and faithfulness in Christ Jesus and our own experiences of that in our very own lives.

So, on Thursday, when I was sitting in my doubt state, I was wondering if we do not have prayers, we do not have faith in God, no hope. Then what else is left for me? As I was sitting in all this, Josh, my husband, texted me and invited me to lunch very aware of my doubting morning. My husband has a way of encouraging me and reminding me of God’s love by his sure and calm manner. So, over a nice sandwich and sweet ice-tea he reminded that first of all, I am loved, loved by him and loved by God with all my flaws and all my gifts. That God has made me and called me. God has shown God’s faithfulness in so many ways in our life that Josh and I cannot imagine to live this life without faith and without God. Often times, we would just say to each other, how can you go through life without God? In guidance, in comfort, in providing hope, and in many other ways I was able to remember God’s faithfulness and love in my life and without faith, I am not sure where I would be. And through that, I was comforted and reassured.

Friends, it is in this context of God’s love to us in Christ, that we are reminded today about faith. Faith is the assurance that God is with us. The assurance that we are loved just as we are. The assurance that we belong. The assurance that we matter. It is the assurance that God who calls us to move forward and take steps in life will always walk with us. Our faith is about trusting that God is love and that we are part of this flow of love and that we become partners with God when we participate in this flow of love.

Friends, when we find ourselves in doubt or even places of self-doubt, when we need faith to move us forward, we can remember what God has done in the past in the lives of our forefathers and mothers of faith and in our lives. So, the encouragement for you and me today is to reflect on our own relationship with God. How is this back and forth going between you and God? Between me and God? I also encourage you to spend some time reading the stories of faith in the Bible. Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Rahab, Jesus. Those stories have a capacity to not only inspire us but also touch our hearts in such a way that God would remind us and open our eyes on seeing God's love and faithfulness in our very own lives. All that will strengthen our faith in turn, and help us walk by faith and encourage others.

So, this is our encouragement and our blessing today. Amen.