

“What is faith?”

Sermon on Sunday, August 10, 2025

Dear church,

Sometimes the most familiar words are the least understood. Familiar words when we look at them repeatedly become almost confounding. Everybody seems to know what faith is... but do we? What is faith? The wonderful English language, which is so malleable and bendable, has created a word that fits all sizes and spiritual occasions - secular, religious, or interpersonal. “I have faith in the Eagles this season,” fans are proclaiming at the beginning of the pre-season. “I have faith in you!” a father says to his struggling son, a friend says to a friend who is at a fork in her life, a teacher says to a student who is going through a crisis. It’s wonderful that the word “faith” is not reserved for church or religion exclusively. It has a deep meaning in people’s lives. I have benefited from people having faith in me when I wasn’t so sure about myself.

And... since the beginning of the early church, faith has been the word that describes our ideal relationship with God, in both ways. We have faith in God even when things aren’t perfect around us. God has faith in us, even though sometimes you wonder... how can the Lord have faith in a humanity that is constantly at war, whether with weapons of destruction or weapons of bullying and squeezing others economically? My answer is, it’s because God knows who we can be. God sees the potential in us. Against all odds, God has faith in us!

Recently, I listened to an interview with a German comedian. (Yes, German comedians exist! People do occasionally laugh over there!) He was asked why the country ranks so low in the famous annual happiness survey. Germany is number 22 in the world, the US is number 24 by the way, while the Scandinavian countries regularly occupy the top of the scale. Finland is on top, followed by Sweden and Iceland. Even countries like Israel, which is in the middle of a war, and Mexico, which deals with persisting drug violence, shockingly rank in the top ten. The comedian dead panned, “When I look at this it seems that what you need to be happy is that it is dark half of the year, that you are going through a war or deal with high crime rates...” Then he turned serious, and he said, “I think it has less to do with the objective circumstances and more with our attitude, our state of mind, our expectations and where we come from. Much of it is mental.”

I believe that’s true. An immigrant who comes from abject poverty and now lives in modest, even poor circumstances in our community will teach us lessons about gratitude, happiness, faith and how privileged we are in many ways... They have seen much worse... I called a locksmith recently - it was for my car; it was an emergency. The voice on the other end sounded like that of an Eastern European person. I was wondering aloud whether he could come that afternoon even though we were expecting a flashflood. He said, “Of course, I’ll be there. I’d be there if there was a snowstorm.”

It's a matter of perspective! In the same way, faith is a matter of perspective. Today's readings help us understand faith by applying three different perspectives, relating to the three dimensions of time.

In The Old Testament reading, Abraham is worried and anxious about his **future**. Anxiety is always about the future. It's a function of our ability to imagine the future and wonder what will happen to us and our loved ones. Abraham was worried whether he would have an heir and descendants, whether he would amount to something in this world. God used a visual. "He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abraham believed. Trusted. Let go of his anxiety... Objectively, nothing had changed. Mentally, spiritually, everything had changed. That's what the Book of Genesis calls faith. Jesus once said, "Do not worry about tomorrow. Today has its own worries." Same thing. Not spending too much time worrying about the future is an anti-anxiety prescription.

In the reading from Hebrews, the author goes way back into the **past** and recounts all kinds of examples of faith that the Hebrews had at their disposal. There were many, and many more have been added since then. The story I shared on Friday is an example from the very recent past, someone making it through a severe crisis of identity and vocation with the help of God and a caring family and community. There will be occasions for you to look back at your own life or the lives of people you knew, that are faith-inspiring. Recall those stories! Remember those stories! Those stories are dopamine!

Finally, the gospel reading for today is very much about the **present**, the here and now, this moment in time. "Do not be afraid, little flock," Jesus says. And instead of comforting them with words, he sends them out to do good things. "Be dressed, ready for service," he says. "Be vigilant!" Do something with the gifts that are given to you. That is an expression of faith, and it will give you more strength than many well-intended words. Doing beats worrying any day!

So, faith connects us with God through the past, the present, the future. Anxiety cuts us off. Fear cuts us off. Distraction cuts us off. Negative self-talk cuts us off. But enduring trust, which I call faith, carries us through the dimensions of time and through the various moments of life. Faith comes with practice. It strengthens with experience. It grows with memories, and it sets us up for the future. Have faith, little flock! **Amen.**