

“A Ready Faith”

“... faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” writes the author of Hebrews.

That appears to us to be a definition, something to which we can all nod our heads in approval and respond, *“Now we understand what faith is.”* No, we do not. Even if we comprehend what these words are saying, they open only a small window into the vast landscape that is faith.

Abraham is put forth as a model of faith, yet at the outset of today’s First Lesson, we encounter an Abraham who is anything but a paragon of faith. *“Woe is me,”* he laments, ***“I continue childless, . . . and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.”*** That is hardly what we would call full trust in the promises of God. Most assuredly this is not ***“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen . . .”*** Yet, Hebrews tells us, ***“By faith he [that is, Abraham] received power of procreation, even though he was too old — and Sarah herself was barren — because he [that is, Abraham] considered him [that is, God] faithful who had promised.”***

So which is it? Abraham trusted; or Abraham despaired? And which of those is faith? I suggest they both are. They are the two sides of the coinage of faith. One cannot have assurance and conviction without having first experienced doubt and despair.

Martin Luther understood this. His own experience had been of one who doubted to the point of almost maddening despair. To his Confessor, Staupitz, he acknowledged that he could never have the love and forgiveness of God. Yet here was a man who came to embrace the truth of that love and forgiveness as few have. To his friend, Spalatin, Luther admitted, *“I can think it up here [in his head], and I can pour it out here [with his lips]. . . but here [in his heart], here my dear Spalatin. not yet. I wish I could be one who hears and believes and that be the end of it.”*

Luther had a term for this condition: *Anfechtung*. It’s the German word

for “attack” — Luther comprehended that his faith was constantly under attack. What he came to realize was that the attack was three-fold: It came from the Devil, from what was going on around him in a broken and sin-filled world, AND (perhaps most significant of all), his own internal, sin-directed, guerrilla warfare. It is this third that we are most frequently incapable to discern to be at work.

We live in a culture that feels it has pretty much debunked the idea of a personal Devil (and forget entirely about demons). If you tell people that you believe in the Devil, likely as not they will laugh at you (even some “spiritual people” feel that they have moved beyond that!). Most folks still believe that there is evil at work in the world — 9/11 provided more than enough evidence for that; but the majority in this culture do not want to believe that, lurking within, there is an evil that derails each of us as it seeks to control us.

Oh, we’ll admit that we’re no saints . . . we’re not perfect . . . we have what we like to label as “hang ups” or “peccadillos;” some will even admit to an addiction or some nasty, intractable habit. But “evil”? No, we don’t think of ourselves along those lines. Because we have been led not to really take evil seriously.

Jesus did. He regarded evil with utmost seriousness. That’s why He tells us today: ***“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”*** Most of us hadn’t thought there was any reason to be afraid. What’s there to be afraid of? Boogeymen? Things that go bump in the night? We left those childish fears behind long ago. Jesus knows of what we should be afraid: a thief (and I’m not talking about cyber-criminals). This thief will rob us of everything if we are not careful.

Oh yes, we should be afraid indeed. This thief wants not only our possessions; he wants us. He wants to rob us of our joy, our hope, our love. He wants to strip from us our dignity, our status, our relationships. This thief is more than a robber; this thief is a killer. He wants us dead. Make no mistake about that; make no joke about that. Satan wants you

dead.

The Father, our Abba, wants to give us the kingdom. The thief wants us dead. The Kingdom is life, now and everlasting. The thief wants to steal it all from us. He works to convince us that he wants to do nothing of the sort. He tries to instill in us the idea that we cannot really have what Jesus offers. He looks for opportunities to kill in us any hope for the promises of grace and forgiveness.

So . . . ***“Do not be afraid,”*** Jesus counsels. But do not at the same time pretend that this threat is not real. Deal with it. The thief wants to rob you of what the Kingdom offers by substituting empty promises, bankrupt ideas, and a corrupt infatuation with things. How do you take that seriously? ***“Sell your possessions, and give alms.”*** Jesus says. The thief will whisper: *“What are you, nuts? Don’t sell, horde; don’t give, criticize. Make sure that nobody gets something for nothing!”* Jesus bids us to lose our attachment to stuff; the enemy wants to heighten it.

This is when we discover where faith comes in. Which voice do we trust? Take a look at your life, and you tell me. Is it the voice that bids you to place others ahead of self? Or is it the voice that is fearful that someone might take advantage of you? Is there a god? Yes, we say. Is Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior. Yes, again, we confess. Did God create? Some get a little nervous. Does Jesus lay claim on us? More nervous yet.

In a little while, we will make an affirmation of our faith, and we will all state publicly that this is what we believe; this is our faith. But it is not. Those words are what in an earlier age would have been labeled our *assensus*; we agree that they are true. We assent that they contain the right content. Do not confuse this with faith.

Abraham’s faith was not that he agreed that God *could* provide him an heir; Abraham’s faith was that he lived life on the basis that God *would* provide him an heir. Of course he doubted; the man was, after all, as the Hebrews author well states: ***“as good as dead!”*** It is never easy to believe that God can and will work His purposes through the likes of us.

We are not called just to assent to that idea; we are pressed into service to live it out, and to live out of it. It is not what you have up here . . . or what you can spew out here . . . it is here, where you live and breathe, that faith matters.

What are your fears? What anxieties have you? What frustrations do you face? What promise of God are you not seeing? Where is God's presence veiled from your eyes? That's the stuff of faith. And behind it all is this: Where do you really belong?

The people of faith from the past, ***“confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth;”*** they knew they had a destiny that would not necessarily be realized in time. So they were ready and willing to work and live as if that destiny mattered more than anything else — more than family, job, security, bank account, home, friends, reputation, status . . . more than anything!

“ . . . faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” to be sure. But it is more yet. It is your life yielded into the hands of the Father who loves you, the Son who rescues you, and the Spirit who now must guide you. It's not what you think; that is, it's not what you think — it is what you live.

So Jesus says: ***“sell your possessions . . . give alms . . . make purses for yourselves . . . be dressed for action . . . have your lamps lit . . . be like those who are waiting for their master to return . . .”*** This is the living faith God provides. But maybe you want to say, *“I can't do that!”* and you may well speak the truth.

First, let's admit that *“I haven't done that,”* is not the same thing as *“I cannot do that.”* But then it may be the reality that, given your present circumstances, assessing the nature of your connection to Christ, measuring the depth of your understanding of His claim on you, and realizing the obstacles that Satan has thrown onto your path, that indeed you cannot do all that Christ is asking of you.

Would you then ask the Holy Spirit to take you to that place — that

spiritual dimension — where the Spirit knows you need to be? And if you are not yet ready to take that step of faith, would you at the very least ask the Spirit to start to make you ready to ask for the help you need to get moving?

Abraham was told “*Move out!*” and out he went. We call that great faith. We are invited to step out in faith — it amounts to the same thing. We may not display great faith . . . all Christ asks of us is that we live out the faith we have, and let Him provide what we lack.

Amen.