

Sunday, August 11, 2019
 Lectionary 19, Year C
 9th Sunday after Pentecost

Faith - and the ELCA

Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

*Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church
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*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable
 in your sight o God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

Amen

*Grace and peace to you from God who was, and God who is, and God who
 will be forever.*

Amen

[Sing We've Come This Far by Faith]

Faith - what is it?

Paul tells us that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...by faith our ancestors received approval. 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."

Things hoped for?

How long do we have to wait for things hoped for to be made manifest? The ancients hoped for God to fulfill God's promises and for thousands and thousands and thousands of years they waited in hope for the messiah...yet, Abram and Sari had waited in hope for a child and through their faith in a God that was not of their ancestors, they found approval. They had a son.

It may seem hard to have faith at times when hope seems far off, but paul assures us that it is as simple as touching the natural world - the world that was spoken into being by God - created from nothing - from things not visible - into this magnificent display of God's grandeur all around us.

Like a tempest - God set our hearts on fire to have hope when it seems hopeless - and to have faith even when it might not yet be visible. This is the restlessness and passionate God we speak of in the Gathering Hymn today - this is the God that rouses us when God's heart breaks so that ours too may feel God's pain and we reach our hands out to those whom are in distress claiming the kingdom...not for us...but for those whom do not yet know the kingdom is already theirs.

But this seems a weary and tiresome effort to live into again, and again, and again...

How far must we go - relying on our faith - until things get better?

Born in 1933, Albert Goodson - a man of African descent - gave us the immortal words of a church hymn that still resonate today to those waiting in faith. While living in Chicago without family or friends he sat down to the piano and plucked out this hymn:

“We’ve come this far by faith,

Leaning on the Lord,

Trusting in his holy Word

He has never failed me yet.”

Our faith has brought us this far...at the ELCA Churchwide gathering in Milwaukee...Bishop Elizabeth Eaton was re-elected as our presiding bishop. Her margin of nearly 87% of the vote is a clear message from the church...we value the ministry of women...we have come this far by faith...leaning on the lord...because we also celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of women...only fifty years and we have this far.

A little slower, though, because it has only been forty years of celebration for the ordination of women of color to the church.

Interestingly enough, the Lutheran Church here in the United States has a very deep history with people of color...most notably going back to before the Civil War in our seminary in Gettysburg. The seminary sat - and continues to sit - on the very site of the first shots of the battle of Gettysburg.

When it was still not acceptable, seminary president SS. Schmucker worked with a young African American man named Daniel Payne. Daniel Payne studied under Schmucker and later went on to become a bishop in the AME church...and was a prominent figure in the structure of Mother

Emanuel AME church in Charleston South Carolina. The oldest historically black church south of Baltimore.

Mother Emanuel has always been a voice for freedom and equality. Booker T. Washington spoke at this church. Members of this church marched for rights and fair labor practices.

We also know this as the place where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke during the Civil Rights Movement...and we can never forget...where...on June 17th 2015...a young man was welcomed in the doors of this church...embraced and invited to a Bible Study. This young white man received the hospitality of angels and in returned released the demon of racism when he murdered nine people...and it is not a secret to the world that he claims membership in the ELCA.

So much sin stains this nation - but none as deep as the sin of racism.

At our Churchwide Assembly this year, the national church voted overwhelmingly to declare July 17th a Feast Day for the Emanuel Nine. A day of repentance, prayer, and education on how we as a church must do better if we are to combat racism in our nation and in our own communities.

“We've come this far by faith
Leaning on the Lord
Trusting in His holy word
He never fail me yet”

Dear God, I pray, dear God walk with our church as we take these important steps to ensure a better tomorrow...

“No turning around
We've come this far by faith...”

It is the faith in God that has brought us this far!

Paul continues to tell us of the faith Abraham had in God:

“For he [Abraham] looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 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. 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.”

By faith we are assured of things hoped for. It is our faith in Jesus Christ that gives us the power and the protection of God as we embark on this bold new world laid out for us by Churchwide. This is a remarkable time when we, as a church, celebrate and embrace one another in our on going endeavor to bring the kingdom of God to more and more people.

Another bold step at the Assembly - is when the ELCA did something no other church body in the United States or the world has done - we declared our church...the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America - as a sanctuary church. A church where all of God's people are seen as equal, embraced, and protected from the sins of racism, exclusion, and dehumanizing labels such as "illegal" or "unworthy." The ELCA and St. Stephen's are sanctuaries for anyone needing the embrace and protection of God our Father in heaven.

We are not yet perfect - nor will we ever find that pure perfection as Christ - but we are moving forward in faith together - a church and people seeking to live in hope of a God that will forever change our very essence to the goodness we know we are all capable of.

How long do we have to wait for things hoped for to be made manifest?

How far must we go - relying on our faith - until things get better?

Our own mortality reminds us that we do not always get to see things hoped for...but our faith makes us know that what we do now will benefit so many to come.

Paul concludes:

"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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 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."

God is not ashamed of the work we are doing - but imagine what we can accomplish here before we go on to that city God is preparing for us in the life to come?