

Today we're talking about faith. We all know what it is but even in thinking about it we have to acknowledge its elusiveness, its hidden qualities. Hebrews 11 describes faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (KJV Hebrews 11:1) Somewhat obscure but the very key to our understanding of God in life.

In the past few weeks, we have looked at what it is to be doing God's work as the church on earth. Not God doing our work but we working for God. We also looked at being transformed and empowered to do God's work with confidence and with authority.

And we considered that living a life like this, in God's plan as the church blessed us greatly, in fact ushers heaven's bounty to us now, simply because God is mindful of us.

Today we're going to expand on those blessings to see that the source of them is anchored in the exercise of our faith.

Faithfulness is the basis upon which God's blessing is given and received. As Paul says, in verse 26 from our first reading; we are "Children of God – through faith."

So: God brings the goodness of blessings in life to us, God's children – by our faithfulness.

Without faith in God in this story that changes lives, that cleanses guilt and sin, that empowers transformation, and gives confidence and authority to us, without this faith we realize no spiritual blessings.

Now, what I am not saying is that a person without faith does not have blessings in life. We know that's not true, but at what I am saying is that the sweet blessings from God, the heaven-rich blessings, come to us through our faith.

Let's put a pin in that idea for a little while as we jump into our scripture lessons today.

I want to give a look at some significant back-story and forward-story that bookend our reading from 1st Kings today. This is all part of the story of the prophet Elijah.

He was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and this story is set at the time when Ahab was King and his wife Jezebel, queen. But Jezebel was actually the “power broker” in this family and was having the prophets of the Lord killed across Israel – it was a bad time!

Elijah had been a thorn in Ahab and Jezebel’s side for a long time. They worshiped other gods and they were driving all of Israel to worship other gods too.

In Chapter 18, just before our reading, Elijah has had enough. He invites the people and 450 prophets of the god Baal and the 400 prophets of the god Asherah to come to Mount Carmel and decide, as he put it, “If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

Then they each in turn build a sacrifice but when the prophets of Baal call on their god to burn up the sacrifice nothing happens and Elijah makes fun of them.

But then Elijah builds his sacrifice, has them wet it thoroughly with water 3x and then prays to God and fire comes down and burns up the sacrifice and all the water. And then Elijah has the people, who have now again chosen the Lord as God, put the 450 prophets of Baal to the sword.

So, when Jezebel finds out about this, she intends to kill Elijah and tells him so and he runs for it, far far away.

In the other side of our scripture today, Elijah, at God’s direction, appoints kings to rule over Israel and Syria and then picks a new prophet, Elisha to replace himself when he is taken up to God.

1 Kings 19:1-15

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

³ Elijah was afraid^[a] and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day’s journey into the

wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”⁵ Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.”⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.”⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁰ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹¹ The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁴ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹⁵ The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus.

The Word of the Lord

The Hebrew words translated “a gentle whisper” in verse 12 in our NIV Bible are

qol damamah daqqah.

Qol can be translated as “voice or sound.” *Damamah* usually means “to be silent, or motionless,” and *daqqah* means “small or thin.”

With this in mind you could mix and match these 6 ideas in various ways. Besides the NIV, translation the NRSV says “sound of sheer silence” the New American Standard Bible translates “a sound of a gentle blowing”; and the King James version says “a still small voice” which most people remember and talk about.¹

To me, this seems like a weird time for God to be quiet doesn't it? After all the drama of God burning up the offering at Elijah's call and the killing of the prophets of Baal and Elijah on the run and hiding in a cave! And it is not like Elijah just went to the next town over. He went 113 miles to BeerShebah and then another day into the desert and then another 260 miles to Mount Horeb where he met God. He was really on the run. And then, at the end of all that action. God shows up in a gentle whisper.

The symbols that were thought to represent God in Moses's time; wind, earthquake, and fire, are no longer revealing of God's presence in Elijah's time.

God's fire burned up the offering on Mount Carmel but God himself came with silence.

Elijah must have been surprised. God was doing a new thing!

Elijah had a very human problem in that he could not see what God was doing. Elijah asked God a very specific question. He wanted to have his life protected. His answer was completely unexpected, turn around go back from where you came from. What the heck? Back there??

Huddled in his cave, Elijah could not see anything beyond himself; he knows he is the last prophet, the last person who can fight God's battles for God. Poor little God!

¹ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, *Commentary on 1 Kings 19:1-4 [5-7] 8-15a*, Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-3/commentary-on-1-kings-191-45-78-15a>, June, 20, 2010, Accessed 6/16/22

Elijah could not see the protective hand that God placed upon him when he was on the run. He could not see the 7000 prophets remaining that God had protected, thinking he was the only one left. He could not see the plan that God had for him to accomplish until he had surrendered his running to God's quietude, and found his faith again.

When we have no God, nothing bigger than ourselves, we have to go it alone. When we cannot see God within our little circle,² here we sit with only ourselves.

The illusions found in aloneness fail to see the dynamic presence of God, the resources of divine grace, the gift of undeserved mercy, the powers that specialize in making the impossible, possible.³

We find only ourselves – or - we find our faith, in what we cannot see. A faith which surpasses all understanding.

Can you think of a really great memory for you, one that makes you feel so comfortable and warm just thinking about it?

Mine is sleeping in the backseat of the car on a long trip when I was maybe 7 years old. The family would pack up the car and head off to the cabin my dad and his best friend had built together decades earlier on Priest Lake in northern Idaho. Sleeping in the backseat of the car, no seatbelt, big wide bench seat, feeling not a care in the world as the tires hummed over the highway, total faith in the driver, so close to the ideal.

The apostle Paul is dealing with what his picture of the ideal is in his letter to the Galatians. He is arguing that faith has overcome the Jewish laws of the Torah, a specific faith in Christ. That this faith clothed each of us in Christ by God's own actions and that our differences no longer have any value. The things that separated us before Jesus - are now gone; race, class, gender. The ideal picture of the Lord's new church.

But as you know, Paul was speaking about the ideal condition of the Christian Church. To the church in Galatia, a place of Jewish and Gentile society, a

² Trevor Eppheimer, ED David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, vol. 2 (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), *Theological Perspective*, 150

³ *ibid*

place that had hardly even heard the story of Jesus, of the Messiah that came and died to save, his words must have sounded bizarre. That church was standing in a place of great struggles and they needed to know that only a great power could make a difference, the power of Jesus' grace and mercy.

And, Paul knew, as we know that the differences between people are nothing compared to the power of God to reconcile all things. Jesus is the master weaver, who has made one body, and Church, out of an infinitely varied tapestry of believers.⁴

So, being clothed in Christ means that even basic human distinctions of race, class, and gender all break down. All children of Christ, are one in Christ.

But being one in the same body as the church definitely does not mean we shear away our individuality. Although we all have a commonality in Christ, as the Universal Christian Church, we are still, each and every one of us unique and different - and fantastic in God's eyes.

I was looking for a good example of what this unity might look like, where we are all still very unique but under the same common veil of God. A nice picture comes with the family of Jeane and Paul Briggs of Falling Waters, West Virginia, you might know of them.

They have 38 kids; 6 biological and 32 adopted from many places. Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria and Ghana. Many special needs kids, most great needs kids.⁵ Their family photo very much resembles Paul's description of the church being equal in the family of Jesus.

Paul, speaking again in the ideal, says that Christ alone matters: Christ as our unity, our focus, the line of energy along which all relationships run, Christ the beginning and the end, for which we live, Christ from whom nothing can take us, not even death; especially not death.⁶

But all of these words really only make sense for those who are "fully in Christ".

⁴ Carol Holtz-Martin, ED David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, vol. 2* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), *Homiletical Perspective*, 163

⁵ <https://cafemom.com/parenting/225188-briggs-family-quarantine-covid-diagnosis> , accessed 6/18/22

⁶ Martin, *Homiletical*, 165

For the rest of us, we deal with our doubts, our less than sold-outness, our stumblings and living in the real world. Those of us who continually, as Paul says, “work out our faith with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12).

But there is certainty - even in our uncertainty. By faith, I understand that God is good and in God there is a perfection I seek to attain. I’m certain of God and God’s blessings but often uncertain of my faith and abilities in God. You see, it’s hard to see the perfect in our life, isn’t it?

And we are all imperfect even when experiencing our best faith.

But, this shouldn’t stop us from being and believing in the best God offers and expects of us. Elijah believed in a perfect God and called down fire to bring the people of the kingdom of Israel back to their God. He was a man burning with faith but also a man who then ran away only to respond for God another day and blessed by God the remainder of his days.

Paul was a terrible example of a man to be chosen by God, a hunter of Christians yet chosen to be clothed in Christ himself as an example of faith for all of us. He lived the rest of his life in faith preaching the good news to the known world and called everything else in his life rubbish compared to the blessings he had in knowing Christ Jesus. Both of these men spoke of an ideal God but lived in the real world as real men.

We are faced every day with thinking the ideal but living the real all around us.

Today we recognize and celebrate 2 holidays of heritage and heart. Juneteenth and Father’s Day.

Juneteenth commemorates the emancipation of enslaved African-Americans across this whole nation, even in Texas. It has been celebrated annually on June 19 in various parts of the country since 1865. Today we celebrate culture and history and uniqueness in one nation. In the ideal, today celebrates the greatest change in African-American life in US history.

In the real, we live in a society that continues to have a lot of changing to do. Race is nothing less than complicated in America and nothing more than an amazing blessing to who we are. We need to celebrate each other and everyone should be proud of who they are.

We also celebrate Father's Day. Like Paul and Elijah, Faith in an ideal father is what we seek but we live in the real. Real fathers on average don't fare so well so today isn't a celebration for everyone. Statistically, 1 in 4 kids in the country live without a biological, step, or adoptive father in the home⁷ and over 40% of children are born annually to unwed mothers.⁸ Tragic problems with tragic consequences. Still, we celebrate the ideal while experiencing the real because so much of the real in real fathers remain a tremendous blessing to us all.

The country's first Father's Day was celebrated on June 19, 1910, the in Spokane, Washington, my hometown. But, it wasn't until 1972, that the day honoring fathers became a nationwide holiday in the United States. When it was first introduced as a holiday, many men, disdained the day. As one historian writes, they "scoffed at the holiday's sentimental attempts to domesticate manliness with flowers and gift-giving, or they derided the proliferation of such holidays as a commercial gimmick to sell more products—often paid for by the father himself."⁹

So anyway— Happy Father's Day! We don't intend to try to domesticate your manliness today or deride you with flowers, but on your way out there is an appreciative 6"- adjustable wrench on the board on your right as you enter Fellowship hall that you should take home with you. 1 per man please, even if you are not a father.

God used men and women experiencing great challenges and doubts in their lives and their faith to change the course of history. Elijah and Paul and even dads are our examples today.

Yet, we are reminded that The Lord doesn't call the equipped; He equips the called. Even if we are ill-equipped to do God's work, we are still called to do

⁷ <https://www.fatherhood.org/father-absence-statistic> , accessed 6/18/22

⁸ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/276025/us-percentage-of-births-to-unmarried-women/> accessed 6/18/22.

⁹ History.com Editors, *Father's Day 2022*, <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/fathers-day> , accessed 6/17/22.

it. In faith, we can live in this real world and still do the work of an ideal God and enjoy the blessings that flow from the Lord in the experience.

May we be real for God.

Amen