

On Faith

I want to talk this morning about faith. The unknown writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the longest letter in our New Testament not written by Paul, famously calls faith, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That is a wonderful definition but I’m less interested today in defining faith in the abstract than looking at how we observe the absence of faith in the life of a human being, at how faith arises in us, and at how our lives change when we enter into faith. We’re going to spend some time this morning with three passages from Scripture, which you’ve already heard or spoken this morning, as well as with some current issues from the national and local media. You may not agree with everything I have to say – no great shock there – but I hope you will listen with generous and open ears and hearts and that we will all go from this place today considering how it is that the faith we claim in the Risen Christ impacts the ways in which we live, do business and even vote.

“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’” That is the rather confrontational opening of Psalm 53, which is not in the lectionary for this week and, in fact, is not in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary at all, although some denominations use its near identical twin, Psalm 14, on a couple of occasions. It may have seemed to you an unlikely Call to Worship, its ending of joy in God’s promise notwithstanding. But I chose to use it this morning because it introduces this whole idea of what life looks like when there is no faith in God versus how the faithful life expresses itself. The psalmist calls those without belief in God fools not because of some apparent mental deficiency on their parts but because of the moral deficiency revealed in their lives. “They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good... (they) eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God,” says the psalmist. These are the ones who take advantage of others; the language is reminiscent of the prophet Amos, who accused the rich and powerful of his day of selling out their needy brothers for the price of a pair of shoes: “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’” Perhaps the sandals in question were Manolo Blahnik’s, which are currently on sale at Neiman Marcus for under \$1,200! And, if you think our psalmist went too far by calling these powerful, ruthless people fools, consider what Amos had to say to the wives of the heedless rich: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring something to drink!’ The Lord God has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.” It makes Bernie Madoff’s sentence sound lenient, doesn’t it?

Fiery language aside, the author of Psalm 53 clearly connects a lack of belief in God with the kind of self-centered behavior that plagued both his society and ours. To mistreat others, to turn a deaf ear to the cries of the oppressed, these are clear indications to the psalmist that an individual has no real faith in the compassionate Creator of All. Frankly, I agree, but hear me carefully. We all know people who profess real doubt if not outright unbelief about the existence of God and yet lead exemplary lives, marked by compassion and self-sacrifice. And we all know people who have been proclaimed pillars of the Christian community in one way or another, who lead lives that are often self-seeking and lacking in compassion. But Jesus told a story that I think puts this in perspective: “A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and

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work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” It is important to remember that the Scriptural view of faith always has to do with faith as it is lived out in action, not with faith as intellectual assent to an idea.

Our Gospel reading gives us a picture not of those who lack faith entirely, but rather of believers whose faith has wavered in the face of extreme trial. At the beginning of our story, none of the disciples other than Mary Magdalene have seen the resurrected Jesus. Peter and “the other disciple,” presumably John, have seen the empty tomb but are unsure as to its significance. Whether or not they believe Mary’s testimony is unclear, but they are certainly frightened by the events of the last few days, not knowing whether the Sanhedrin or even the Romans will pursue them for being associates of the convicted and executed blasphemer and revolutionary, Jesus of Nazareth. It is only once Jesus has appeared to them, offered proof of his identity and breathed the Holy Spirit into them that their fears diminish. It takes a tangible demonstration of the power of the Living God to restore their faith in God’s loving care for them. Only after they have seen Jesus do they become the bold witnesses we read about in Acts. We should not be too hard on poor Thomas, by the way. He only asks for the same experience that his fellows have shared. One commentator I read this week wrote of an incident when he was rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery. Although she was assured on the telephone that he was alright, his sister, who lived quite some distance away and was preparing for her own wedding the following week, dropped everything to make the journey of several hours to visit him. “She had to see for herself that I was alive and being cared for,” he wrote. Sometimes the need for proof comes not from doubt but from love.

Truth be told, for me, as a native of the “Show Me” State of Missouri, Thomas’ reaction to the story of his fellows is completely understandable. I believe that the proof of the pudding is in the eating and that by their fruits, you shall know them. But I am also very aware of the teaching of Jesus in this passage when it comes to matters of the spirit. “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Unlike Thomas, we do not live at a time when Jesus appears bodily and offers us the “ocular proof,” as William Shakespeare put it, of his wounded hands and feet and side. For us, the only “proof” of Jesus’ resurrection, of the seal of God’s approval on his life and teachings, comes from the Scriptures, or from the testimony of others as to what belief in Jesus has done for them, or from the subtle movement of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, or (in rare examples) of a mystical experience of the presence of God. In our empirical age, that is no proof at all. None of those experiences are scientifically quantifiable data. We cannot verify the truth of Jesus as a propositional certainty. That is why the definition from the Book of Hebrews, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” is important for us. But, again, I’m less interested in the theory of faith this morning than in its working out. The faith the disciples rediscovered drove out their fear and drove them into the world with the Good News of Jesus. Church tradition tells us that Thomas took that Good News east, into Persia and even to India, where still today there are communities of “Thomas Christians” who trace their beginnings to his ministry.

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And what of the other disciples? The Book of Acts tells us that they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to preach boldly in Jerusalem, adding thousands of adherents to the Way of Jesus. The lifestyle of these eager believers was completely opposed to that of the one whom the psalmist says lives without belief. Rather than watching for the main chance, making money off of those who flocked to them, preaching that God wanted Jesus' followers to be as rich as possible, they began to share even the little they had, inspiring the new believers to sell houses and land in order to feed the poor. "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." It was that well-known proponent of atheism, Karl Marx, who wrote, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," but the idea was not original to him. It is Christian through and through.

F. Scott Spencer, Professor of New Testament and Preaching at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Virginia, has written a short but powerful exegesis of this passage in Acts and how it ties us both to the reality of the resurrected Christ in whom the disciples came to believe and to the sovereignty of God denied by the powerful fools of Psalm 53. "How did Christ's resurrection motivate such a unified, generous community?" Spencer writes. "Or, conversely, how did the practice of communal goods inform the early church's understanding of the living Christ? First, Christ's resurrection is inextricably connected with his crucifixion. God did not raise Jesus from just any death, but death on a cross, signifying ultimate self-emptying and sacrifice. Jesus dies bankrupt and bereft, stripped of all earthly possessions and reliant only on his Divine Father into whose hands he commits his spirit. It is out of this experience of complete surrender that God brings fresh, resurrection life to Jesus. Losing his life, he saves it. Forfeiting "the whole world" of self-aggrandizing profit, he gains the true wealth of God's kingdom. The crucified and risen Jesus thus inspires his followers to find new life as they "deny themselves and take up their cross daily". They relinquish all they are and own into God's hands or, more literally, at the feet of God's apostles in Acts 4:35. Second, raising Christ from the grave signals anew God's creative sovereignty over all creation. According to one biblical image, God's bringing life from death is likened to a seed falling into the ground, "dying," and then bursting forth, "rising" in fruitful bloom and flower. Resurrection thus stakes afresh God's claim on the whole earth. "The land is mine," God announces, as grounds for the Sabbath and Jubilee provisions of restoring properties to original owners and remitting debts so "there will be no one in need among you." Fittingly, then, the community of the resurrected Christ ceded private ownership and pooled the resources of their "lands and houses" to meet the needs of all."

Now that we've considered the teaching of these three Scriptures, I want to turn briefly to a couple of current issues that I think touch on the truths that we have found in these passages. First, "The Decline and Fall of Christian America," as proclaimed by Newsweek in this week's magazine. The article inside by Jon Meacham is largely a reaction to an online column by and interview with R. Albert Mohler, Jr., current president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Now, I need to confess to you all right up front that I don't like Al Mohler, for reasons both personal and theological. Nevertheless, I tried to read what he had to say with a sense of fairness and compassion. Mohler's contention is that the failure of the program of the Christian Right indicates "a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture." Frankly, I don't find Mohler's argument convincing. I think that by tying the triumph of one particular political viewpoint to the success of the

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Kingdom of God, he is looking more for an empirical proof of God than relying on the faith that Jesus commended when he said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Dr. Mohler has apparently ignored the advice of the Psalm 146, which says, “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.” Instead of believing in God, it seems to me, in having faith that God’s will will triumph over sin and evil, Dr. Mohler and his colleagues have been relying on their own ability to shape the culture into their own image.

I’m much more inclined to agree with Jim Wallis, whose column for this week’s “Sojourn” reads in part, “Personally, I am not offended or alarmed by the notion of a post-Christian America. Christianity was originally and, in my view, always meant to be a minority faith with a counter-cultural stance, as opposed to the dominant cultural and political force. Notions of a “Christian America” quite frankly haven’t turned out very well... The story of Christianity in America in the coming decades will be defined by a multicultural shift as well as a generational one. “New” evangelicals and Catholics, along with black, Hispanic, and Asian churches will now shape the agenda. But also included are the millions of Americans who say they are “spiritual but not religious,” finding homes in non-traditional churches, mega-churches that teach that true religion is found in care for “the least of these.” Making a real impact on the values and directions that a democracy will choose is, perhaps, a more exciting kind of influence than relying on the illusory and often disappointing hopes of cultural and political dominance.” What Wallis describes sounds to me much more like the selfless action of the Acts 4 Church than does the political maneuverings of the Religious Right.

It is the disconnect between the resurrection-faith-in-action of the early New Testament Church and the power plays of some very visible current day Christians that has caused the findings recently published by David Kinnaman of the Barna Group in their book, UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity. I’ve not yet read all of the book but it has been the subject of countless reviews and articles in the media I read regularly. The book presents statistical research and extensive interviews from a three-year study of the attitudes of sixteen to twenty-nine year olds from outside the Church in regards to Christians. The subjects are people with real experience with Christian neighbors, friends, family member, classmates and so on, so their views are based on real relationships and not hearsay. Sadly, the younger generation of those we should be most trying to reach with the Good News view us with hostility, resentment and disdain. According to the study, here are the percentages of people outside the church who think that the following words describe present-day Christianity:

- * antihomosexual 91%
- * judgmental 87%
- * hypocritical 85%
- * old-fashioned 78%
- * too political 75%
- * out of touch with reality 72%
- * insensitive to others 70%
- * boring 68%

That’s what young outsiders think of us, when we describe ourselves as Christian.

It doesn’t sound much like our brothers and sisters in Acts 4, does it? Of course, the change didn’t come at once. Tertullian, the apologist and theologian who lived from AD 155 – 220

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wrote, “Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy. . . . See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other.” Julian the Apostate, emperor of Rome from AD 361–363 and no friend to Christians wrote, “The godless Galileans feed not only their poor but ours also. Those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.” But things did change, so that just a little over a century ago, the famous philosopher Frederick Nietzsche wrote to Christians, “I might believe in your redeemer if you looked more redeemed.”

How then should we live? How can we look more redeemed? How can we begin to change the perception that Jesus’ followers are no longer to be trusted or heard in a world that badly needs the love and peace that Jesus has to offer? My brothers and sisters, we must live in faith. We must live in the kind of faith that is active, the kind of faith that those Acts 4 Christians had. Am I advocating that we all form a Good Shepherd Commune and hold all of our possessions in common? I don’t think we’re ready for that yet but we can certainly continue to take the kind of actions that enable people to understand that we are serious about serving “the least of these.” Let’s keep on looking for new ways to utilize our land and our building to serve our neighbors. Let’s not neglect to bring food for the food pantry and donations for the benevolence fund, even though our own pocket books may be a little thinner these days. After all, even if not all of our wants are immediately realized, we live in the faith that God will provide for our needs, do we not? Let’s speak out on issues that affect our less-powerful, needier neighbors, both near and far. Let’s encourage our congressmen to remember Darfur and the need for peace in Israel and Palestine.

The Seattle Times has been covering the effort by State Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown and some colleagues to pass a bill that would institute a state income tax of between 1 and 3 percent on those earning over \$250,000 a year. Reaction, predictably, has been largely negative. The problem is that in order to deal with huge deficits in the state budget without increasing revenue, the legislature is looking at making drastic cuts in social services and education. The proposed cuts will devastate state funding for such programs as childcare, public health, health care for children and adults, housing and care for seniors. \$1.3 billion is to come from the education budget alone in a state already near the bottom in per student funding. Meanwhile, Washington State with its over-reliance on sales taxes is widely considered to have one of the most regressive tax policies in the United States. It is the poor who see the greatest percentage of their income spent on taxable items and who therefore bear the burden of a sales tax based system. My sisters and brothers it is time for the disciples of Jesus to speak out on this matter. I urge you to write to our legislators in support of the income tax proposal. We must raise this burden from the shoulders of the poor and put it on our own shoulders if need be – although if anyone here is making a quarter of a million a year, I want you to talk to Joan Hightower about raising your pledge.

How then shall we live in a time when our confidence in the structures of this world is shaken? Shall we say in our hearts, “there is no God,” and get as much as we can for ourselves without worrying about others? Shall we cower in our upper rooms in fear, like the disciples before they believed the news of the resurrection and received the Holy Spirit? God forbid! Let us instead live with boldness and generosity, showing the world that it is the Body of Christ that loves and cares for all. Let us show our faith in the Hope of the World, Jesus who was crucified but who is

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alive again. Let us move from the pain and darkness of Lent into the light of Easter for every morning is Easter morning from now on. Thanks be to God.