

Proper 14 C 2019

Genesis 15:1-6

Psalm 33:12-22

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

How can we prepare for what we cannot imagine?

How can we be ready for the unexpected?

Let me pause for a moment just to say –
Because some of you, I think, are thinking it –
It was very tempting to begin with Monty Python.
Nobody expects ...

Now that we've got that out in the air,
Out of our systems,
Let's go back and wonder again –

How can we prepare for what we cannot imagine?

How can we be ready for the unexpected?

How do we face the unknown future
With faith – rather than fear?

Don't be afraid, says Jesus.
If we know anything about scripture,
We know what these words really mean.
Sit up and take notice,
Because something very big is about to happen.
Don't be afraid means,
Something you could not possibly imagine
Is arriving right now,
And guess what?
You are unprepared.

But don't be afraid,
Because you have everything you need.

Don't be afraid,
Mary of Nazareth.
God is inviting you into a partnership
That will bring heaven to earth.

Don't be afraid,
Shepherds of Bethlehem.
The heavens have just opened
And given a message of welcome and inclusion
To you,
The lowest of the low –
And invited you to share the unbelievable news.

Don't be afraid,
Companions on the road to Jerusalem.
Jesus,
Your wandering teacher
Has just called himself
A thief in the night.
But that's only to get your attention.
Once he's got it,
He will invite you
To abandon everything that makes you secure
In order to win
Something that cannot be seen.

Only the ears of faith can hear,
Don't be afraid –
And not be afraid.

Only by faith
Can we prepare for what we cannot imagine.

Now faith is different
From a blind, naïve notion
That somehow everything will be alright.
Faith never sits back
And waits for things to get better on their own.
Faith has no use for platitudes,
Or wishful thinking.

Scripture and our tradition tell us
Faith is entirely different.

Faith is, says the sermon or treatise
We call the letter to the Hebrews,
The assurance of things hoped for,
The conviction of things not seen.

Like hope,

Like love too, believe it or not,
Faith is a virtue,
Not a feeling.
That means faith grows
When it is tended,
When it is nurtured.
When it is put to work.

A hard working faith
Is prepared for the unexpected.
Ready for the unimaginable.
Not by figuring out what will happen,
But by discovering
That whatever happens,
We will have what we need
To meet the need.

So how do we discover within ourselves,
How do we call forth from each other,
How do we offer to the world,
A faith that means something?

A faith that is grounded in hope
And finds expression in acts of love.

Faith is not something
We create for ourselves
By an act of will.

It is something that grows from within us,
Grows from a hidden seed
That is planted in every living thing.
And still, that faith
Needs tending
To come into the light,
To grow,
To bear fruit.

We need help,
To let faith grow within us.

We need to hear, to learn,
To find a glimmer of understanding.
It is not something we can ever fully understand
Or explain,
But still, we can try.

How do we learn about faith?
From the stories of scripture,
The gifts of our tradition,
And perhaps most of all,
From watching and listening
And sharing experience
With those who show us what it means to have faith.

How do we get good at faith?

Practice, practice, practice.

Practice prayer.
Practice hospitality.
Practice a Sabbath rest.
Practice discernment.¹

Be an agent of healing.

Above all, perhaps,
Engage the hard soul work
Of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Think of someone who prays.
I remember a woman
Who was confined to her chair
For the last three years of her life.
She felt useless,
Isolated,
Until she was reminded
That her daily prayers,
Her petitions for six hundred people,
Were a work of faith
That she was uniquely qualified to do.

Think of someone who gathers community.
I think of a man who was a good cook,
Not a great cook,
With a big table,
A simple but ample table,
Who called friends together every weekend.
He would lift his glass of sparkling water,
And invite them to raise a glass of wine,
And wonder with them
About all the things

That are outside the realm of polite conversation.
Politics. Money.
At his table,
Friends and strangers were welcome,
Included, valued;
They received the gift of listening.

Think of someone who serves those in greatest need.
I knew a woman who left her own home,
By choice,
To go live among those who have no homes.
To hear their stories.
To become their friend.
To consider with them what would make a difference
In their lives.
To advocate for them.

Think of someone who calls out injustice.

Think of someone who discerns a vision
And makes it happen.
Twenty years ago,
Three people from this church
Dreamed of a school that was intentionally inclusive.
Now St. Elizabeth's School
Has 155 students.

Think of someone who has forgiven,
Reconciled,
At great personal cost,
And to infinite reward.

These are among the practices of faith.
This is the promise we have received,
That we will inherit a promise
We cannot see.

There is no doubt
But that we would rather inherit a promise
That assured us
We could know what we need to know,
Gather what we need to gather,
Prepare for any outcome.

The truth is,

That will never happen.
The unexpected will happen upon us.
The unimaginable will materialize
In our midst, in our laps,
In our minds.

And still,
We will have everything we need.
If we hold on to this:

The conviction that what we cannot see
Is still absolutely real:
The goodness and gift
Of a God who wills our good,
And the good of all things.

This is our hope.
It is assured.
Not seen.
But true,
Whether we have faith or not.

But we do have faith.
And so, we have everything we need,
When the unexpected hour arrives.

ⁱ Practicing Our Faith. Dorothy Bass, 1997