

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
October 7, 2007

Pastor Mae Jean Zelle
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-10; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

The common thread that runs through our texts for today is the theme of faith. But these texts are talking about somewhat different aspects of faith; different aspects of faith that we need at different times in our lives.

The Old Testament readings are talking about the faith that you have to have in times of difficulty. You could call this the faith that waits. For example, listen again to Habakkuk, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” He is in the midst of suffering, violence, and injustice. He is waiting, longing, for God to do something about it. And God says, “Wait.”

Faith that waits appears to be the most passive; but it is possibly the most difficult. This is the faith that is not discouraged in the face of misfortune, disappointment or suffering. It is easy to have faith when things are going great. But when things go badly, some are apt to say there is no God, or that God doesn’t care. Some of these are the folks who fall apart in a crisis. They can’t find the strength to just keep going, so they run away, or turn to destructive ways of coping.

But others quietly go on about the business of living, of caring for others. And they do so without a lot of drama. Their faith sustains them through trials. They can say, “This isn’t good, but I know that I am not facing it alone, God is with me. God is at work in the world. This won’t last forever. This is not the end.”

This kind of attitude, this kind of faith, is summed up in a saying that I heard somewhere a long time ago: “The Good Book say it came to pass, it don’t say it came to stay.” That’s the faith that waits, with confidence that this too shall pass, God will win in the end. No matter who we are, there will be times in our lives when we will need faith that waits.

The second lesson, the letter to Timothy, points to another kind of faith, faith that lives. In this letter to Timothy we hear of Lois and Eunice, and about a faith that first lived in them. The text doesn’t exactly tell us what that meant. We can probably guess that it was a faith that shaped how Lois and Eunice lived their lives. It was a faith that, among other things, emboldened them to share their faith in Christ Jesus and his saving power – with Timothy, possibly within the faith community.

When I think of a living faith, I think of parents who live out their faith in the presence of their children, and I think of Sunday School teachers. Sunday School teachers are those whose love of God and faith in God leads them to tell the story, week after week, to children or youth so that faith can come alive in them too.

I don’t know why most churches struggle to find Sunday School teachers. It is one of the dearest opportunities a person can have to share their faith, their understanding of the story of God’s love, with a new generation of believers. I wish more people really saw

that responsibility of teaching as the privilege it is. And I give thanks for the ones who do. Their faith is a faith that lives and gives life to the faith of others.

In the play, "Raisin in the Sun", there is a scene in which a grown daughter is telling her mother that God is an idea that she just doesn't accept. There is simply no blasted God. To which the mother, with strength and dignity simply replies, "I want you to repeat this after me, "In my mother's house there is still God." Slowly, quietly, the daughter repeats, In my mother's house there is still God." Sometimes we all need to hear someone else say to us, "This God, this love, is real; it is real to me."

Now, to be sure, that isn't the only way faith lives. We see living faith in people sharing their God story, in people serving God by caring for neighbor, in people working for justice and peace in the world. All these are ways we see faith that lives. In many and varied ways, we see faith that is undaunted by the obstacles to God's ways. This is the Eveready Bunny faith – that just keeps going and going and going....

But there is a third kind of faith which is the one that the Gospel text talks about. And I think we could call that the faith that surprises. This is the faith that gets us into those situations where we are doing something for God or saying something about or on behalf of God that we never imagined we could or would do. It's the faith that gets people to open their hearts or change their minds in unexpected ways.

The faith that surprises is that mustard seed faith that uproots things that are stuck, that surpasses our expectations, that take our life, our ministry to whole new dimensions. Most of the time we don't venture too far into that territory. We play it safe. We only attempt those things where we are pretty sure we know the outcome. We only attempt those things that don't get too far outside of the way we have always done it before.

Tony Campolo pokes a little fun at churches like that with his image of the Duck Church. He tells a story "of a town where all the residents are ducks. Every Sunday the ducks waddle out of their houses and waddle down Main Street to their church. They waddle into the sanctuary and squat in their proper pews. The duck choir waddles in and takes its place, and then the duck minister comes forward and opens the duck Bible. He reads to them: "Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fences can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings, and you can fly like birds!" All the ducks shout, "Amen!" *And then they all waddle home.*" Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story* (Word, 2000); submitted by Debi Zahn.

When I think about Emanuel I am reminded of the times in which, in its own way, it has found its wings and flown. It has gone beyond the confining walls and fences to do a new thing. In its day, the daycare center was a new thing. Job training and ESL classes were a new thing. The New Century Project has been a venture into unknown territory.

When I think about our future I wonder whether we will continue to fly or whether we will revert to being a duck church. Will we make a transition from being a church that serves a poor neighborhood to being a church that serves the poor elsewhere in the city, or will we become a church that works for peace and justice, or will we find ourselves serving God in our 21st century urban setting in some surprising way that we haven't yet even imagined?

Whatever the case, it will always be true that we find the different aspects of faith in the different stages and situations of our lives. Some of us must, or even now are, waiting through trials. May God increase your faith. Some of us have faith to share that it may come alive in others. May God increase your faith. And some of us may be about to be surprised by where our faith has gotten us to. May God increase your faith as well. And may you know all the joy and peace that such faith can bring. Amen.