

Sermon, August 11, 2019
Proper 14C, Sylvia Miller-Mutia
St. Mark's Episcopal Church

What is Faith?

- "I do not think that word means what you think it means" (Inigo Montoya in Princess Bride)
- **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.** (Hebrews)

There are two proposals I'd like to offer about faith today:

1. Faith is Imagination

- Or Faith is (if not entirely synonymous with, then at the very least fundamentally dependent upon) IMAGINATION.
- Faith is (or at the very least Faith requires) the ability to imagine that things could be different from how they presently ARE - and even that things in the present might be different from how they *appear* to be.
- Now, Faith is not the ability to imagine any old thing (I might imagine cotton candy, beer, and video games are the foundation of good physical and mental health or that Unicorns would make better housemates than the people I actually live with; but that is not Faith.)
- **Faith is Imagination FORMED & SHAPED by a vision of God's Promises and God's Kingdom; Faith is Imagination FORMED AND SHAPED by prayer and worship, by Scripture, and by our relationships with the community of faithful Christians that surrounds us, and the example of the faithful Christians that have gone before us.**

2) Faith (Imagination shaped by God) is a PREREQUISITE for Faithfulness

- **[1st/2nd Lessons]** Only faith enabled Abram and Sarai (later Abraham and Sarah) --an elderly, childless couple--to imagine a future in which their descendants were as many as the stars in the heavens and the grains of sand in the desert. Only that faith, that imagination, that vision of a future that they yearned for but was not yet reality---that faith gave them the power to be faithful--that vision gave them the energy and will to be obedient to the uncertain and arduous journey God set before them.
- **[Gospel]** Only faith, only the ability to imagine a seemingly impossible future, an economy based on God's abundant provision for all creatures--despite all fear and evidence to the contrary--can enable the disciples of Jesus (past or present) to be faithful to his call to radical generosity "Sell your possessions. Give alms."
- **[Gospel]** Only faith, only the ability to imagine a seemingly impossible future, in which the reign of Emperors and Kings and Dictators and Corrupt or Corruptible Rulers is replaced by the reign of the Selfless and Incorruptible Son of Man, can enable the disciples of Jesus (past or present) to persevere in living lives oriented towards generosity rather than greed, towards courage rather than

fear, towards humility rather than power, towards love rather than self-preservation.

- **[St. Mark's]** You know something about this. Faith & Faithfulness are part of the DNA of this congregation. We wouldn't be here today if the people of St. Mark's didn't know about this first hand. Less than a decade ago, this church went through a painful split...and no more than a handful of you were left in these pews....

What is the future hope in which we place our FAITH? What vision of the future is compelling enough to inspire and empower our FAITHFULNESS, here and now?

- Based on God's promises in Scripture; Based on the faithful example of people around us and before us: What is the best, most beautiful, abundant, audacious future we can imagine:
 - For ourselves?
 - For our church?
 - For our children?
 - For our world?
- I don't think we ask this question nearly often enough. We get bogged down in the myriad demands of daily life; we get discouraged by the apparently insurmountable challenges that surround us; we get exhausted just trying to get by. And so, our imagination shrinks. Our dreams diminish. Our vision narrows. Our hope recedes. Our faith fades. Then our priorities jumble. Our commitments waver.
 - **We lose sight of our deepest hope for the church**--that the church be a vibrant, dynamic, diverse, living sign of God's healing power and unconditional welcome and transforming love to a broken and lonely and hurting world---**and so balancing the budget or procuring better signage or increasing attendance becomes our best hope for the church, and our choices and commitments are shaped accordingly.**
 - **We lose sight of our deepest hope for our children**--that they move into adulthood with a deeply rooted spiritual life and practices to anchor them, a committed faith community to surround and support them, an intimate, ongoing connection with the Spirit of God to guide them, a robust sense of divine purpose and vocation that leads them to develop and use their gifts to the fullest in service of the world--**and so making it through the morning without a meltdown or making it to adulthood without religious baggage becomes our best hope for our children, and our choices and commitments are shaped accordingly.**
 - **We lose sight of our deepest hope for the world**--that all people might experience health, and peace, reconciliation and flourishing, and that God's whole creation might flourish--**and so some minimal reduction in environmental degradation or gun violence becomes our best hope for the world, and our choices and commitments are shaped accordingly.**

- But the Spirit of God urges us to dream big; God dares us to give voice to the deepest, truest, longings of our hearts, which are in fact, only the dimmest reflections of the deepest, truest longings of the heart of God. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus both revealed and inaugurated the New Creation, the Dream of God for which we *all* most deeply long. In his embodiment of God's Dream, Jesus calls all of us to conversion. Jesus calls us to turn away from our diminished hopes, to fix our eyes on the great and glorious Dream of God. Jesus calls us return to faith--to name our dreams--to claim our vision--to stretch our imaginations. This Faith, this imagination shaped by the Dream of God, is absolutely crucial if we want to move forward. It's like a compass that helps us determine our direction. It's like a charging station that refuels our passion and energy and commitment to faithfully persevere on the journey towards the future God has set before us! What's more cultivating this faith--this imagination-- is crucial to recognizing the many ways that God's promised future is *already* breaking in to our present reality.

A wise man once wrote: If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea. (Antoine de Saint- Exupéry)

This is my vision, my dream. When I look out at you, faith tells me that this is what you can do. This is what St. Mark's can become. And if I look a little more carefully through the eyes of faith, I catch glimpses that this is not just what you can do--it's what you ARE doing. This is not just what we can become. This is what we ARE becoming.

Today we're asking each one of you to prayerfully complete a form indicating what sorts of commitments you are willing to make to support the young people at St. Mark's in the coming year. We hope you can approach this form, not a list of "chores", but as a concrete opportunity to respond to the Faith that animates and inspires you with Faithfulness-- a chance to be obedient to your BEST HOPE for our church, for our children, for your own spiritual life and growth with God in this community.

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

[Form is an awful lot about collecting wood and assigning tasks---but it doesn't have to be. Turn it over and begin to sketch your vision---and offer one commitment you're willing to make that helps us take a step towards that vision.]

What are you longing for?

I'm going to leave you with a song (written by my friend and colleague Kerri Meyer) as you prayerfully contemplate this question:

What do you most long for?

For Yourself?
For Our church?
For Our children?
For Our world?
In what future will you choose to put your FAITH?
How will you be FAITHFUL to that future today?

(Songs by the Rev. Kerri Meyer):

*El nuevo mundo de que hablamos
El mundo lindo de que cantamos
O es mas es mas que una posibilidad
Si es mas es mas que una posibilidad
Ya yo puedo verlo
Ya puedo oirlo
Esta llegando, llega cantando*

*Another world, another world
Is not just possible its on its way
Another world another world
Is not just possible its on its way
And I can see it coming
I can hear it singing
It's not just possible its on its way.*