

Lectionary Scriptures in message / liturgy:	Genesis 22:1-14 Matthew 10:40-42	2,225 words
Additional scripture references:	2 Corinthians 5:7 Matthew 7:7	
Literary references:	The Bridge Builder (Will Allen Dromgoole)	
Key hymns:	VU 533 When In Our Music VU 663 My Faith Looks Up To Thee VU 274 Your Hand, O God, Has Guided	
Additional music:	God is in Control (Twila Paris) Only Faith (Joseph M. Martin, text by Wesley)	

Keeping the Faith

This morning, we sang “My faith looks up to thee, thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior divine.”

That’s a sentiment or turn of phrase we’ve heard often. Many songs sing about faith. And I think sometimes we just gloss over it. We accept “faith” as a “church concept” the same as words like “grace”, or “Savior”. We grew up with these “church words” sometimes from an early age - so much so that perhaps we never really learned what they meant. We just repeat them because we know what situation they apply to. So we know that faith is something we’re supposed to have, and it’s good, and it helps us somehow.

But what exactly is faith?

How do we know if we have it? How did we get it? How might we lose it?
How would we get it back again?

All difficult questions, if we don't know what faith is in the first place.

The Oxford English Dictionary has two definitions for the word faith:

1. complete trust or confidence in someone or something.
2. strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof.

These two definitions are related. They both imply that we have trust or confidence in something or someone.

However, the second definition has one element missing in the first. That trust or belief is based on "spiritual apprehension rather than proof."

And that's the key. Faith is a belief in something for which there is no proof.

Don't be misled by the word "apprehension" - it also has two definitions. There's the one we usually use, which implies some sort of fear of something bad happening. But that's not what was meant here.

Apprehension as used in the definition of faith means a grasp or understanding of something. It's actually related to the use where somebody has been apprehended - as might be heard in a police report - meaning they are now at hand; they have been grasped, or collared, or pulled in.

In the literary sense, it means we've grasped a concept or understood a situation. So "spiritual apprehension" means that something of a spiritual nature

has become clear to us. We've understood something – and in the definition of faith, it means we've understood something about what God has promised to us.

In second Corinthians we read in chapter 5, verse 7: *“for we walk by faith, not by sight.”*

Paul is saying, to the church at Corinth, that what we should do in our lives depends not on what we can see, but on what we believe.

If that sounds a bit silly, consider all the things we know about but can't see.

Oxygen is a good one, for starters. You and I depend on it every second of our lives, but we can no more see oxygen than we can see the vacuum of space.

We all believe oxygen is there, but there is no visible proof.

Of course, today we have science to give us tests to expose the presence of oxygen. We can tell it is there because of its chemical properties and how it interacts with those things it surrounds.

But think back to Paul's time, to Biblical times. They had no test for oxygen.

So if you were to say to Paul “you live because you breathe this invisible gas called oxygen” the answer might be incredulity. Paul might have no words to answer you. Or, if he did, he may ridicule you for believing in something that wasn't really there. It has no taste or smell, and since you can't see it, you might suspect it isn't really there.

I wonder if Paul would apply the same advice as he gave the Corinthians – that we walk by faith, not by sight.

And that underlines why faith is a difficult concept to grasp. It requires believing in something you can't see and for which you have no earthly proof it exists.

In our reading this morning from Genesis, we heard about how Abraham was tested by God. God said ² *"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."*

So what did Abraham think of this?

He was a parent, after all. So I'm sure he thought "what ?? no way !! I'm not going to burn my son to make God happy!"

I mean, what parent would go along with this cruel instruction from an invisible talking man in the sky?

But what did Abraham do? The story continues...

³ *So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him."*

⁷ *Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"*

⁸ *Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."*

So imagine you were Isaac. You asked your father about the offering, because you were puzzled. Obviously, Abraham had not told Isaac the plan that God revealed to him. Of course he didn't - because Isaac would not have gone along willingly.

But then, your father, whom you trusted - in whom you had faith - lied to your face. Not a lie of commission, of course. It was true that Abraham believed God would provide the offering, so on the face of it, Abraham was telling the truth. But It was definitely a lie of omission - because Abraham had already been told of God's plan by God himself.

Would you expect your parent to withhold a detail like that? Of course not! And right up to the very end, Abraham carried out the plan, until he heard:

12 "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

Wow!

Talk about having your faith tested.

What would you do in a situation like that?

I don't think I'm reaching too far here if I suggest that none of us would willingly go along with a plan, told to us by a disembodied voice in the sky, to take our children and sacrifice them as a burnt offering.

But that's thinking it through. And faith isn't thinking it out. It isn't logical. It's not calculated. It's just - faith. It's based on something you can't see, but have to believe anyway.

I know for me, that has always been difficult. Whenever things get challenging – work, family, finances, health, or social circumstances, any of which are to most of us, ordinary stresses in our lives – we all feel the need to work it out. If things are challenging, we want to rise to the challenge. We want to remain in control, so if there is something troubling us, we work harder to solve it.

And if our solution doesn't work, what do we do? We try even harder – and sometimes, we shut out other avenues in the process. Sometimes, we forget other, ostensibly more important things, in our quest to fix this one problem. We develop tunnel vision – and of course, that makes it even less likely that we will solve the issue that is troubling us!

We need to be in control, and that need can consume us.

The hardest thing to do, I've always found, is to let go – to let God be in control. It's easy to trust in our own abilities – after all, that's what we've always been taught. Be a leader. Be self sufficient. Solve your own problems. Help others solve theirs, too, while you're at it!

Letting go is unbelievably difficult.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we heard a very different story – all about doing good works.

40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;

42 and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

So we are to welcome prophets, and welcome righteous people and give cold water to little ones, and we will be rewarded for this.

That's doing. That's what we call good works. Not faith at all!

Or is it?

How do we know we will be rewarded? Where's the proof that giving a cup of water to a little one will buy us an eternal reward?

And, come to think about it, what exactly is an eternal reward? Something we get after we die... but every one I've seen who has died is just lying there, dead. Doesn't seem like much of a reward to me.

And that, of course, is where faith comes in.

Faith is believing that there is an eternal reward - and even that there is this thing called "eternal life" - even when the overwhelming evidence seems to be to the contrary.

One of my favourite poems is one entitled "The Bridge Builder," by poet Will Allen Dromgoole. It's no secret I've spent many years working with youth, trying to help them find themselves and develop themselves to their potential, and I think I like this poem because it appeals to that idea. But I think there's a bigger idea in it as well, regardless of one's circumstance or situation. The poem goes like this:

An old man going a lone highway,

Came, at the evening cold and gray,
To a chasm vast and deep and wide.
Through which was flowing a sullen tide
The old man crossed in the twilight dim,
The sullen stream had no fear for him;
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.

“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
“You are wasting your strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day,
You never again will pass this way;
You’ve crossed the chasm, deep and wide,
Why build this bridge at evening tide?”

The builder lifted his old gray head;
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followed after me to-day
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm that has been as naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!”

Yes, he's doing this for a youth. But it's really an example of the bridge builder doing what we would call good works - and he doesn't do it for anything he gets out of it. He does a lot of likely very hard work, that doesn't benefit him.

Or does it?

He has faith that what he is doing will be of benefit to somebody else. If it turns out to benefit him in the long run, that would only be in his eternal - rather than his earthly - reward.

Three very different stories - the first one telling how Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac simply because God told him to, and then the other two telling us all to do good things because there is some kind of reward waiting for us.

Three very different stories - but one answer: faith.

It's like believing in oxygen - even though we can't see it. Oxygen that gives us life. And, of course, oxygen that was created by God because God, in his infinite grace, gives us what we need. It's difficult for us to remember to thank God for oxygen, because we can't see it - it requires faith.

I recently saw what I think is probably the best slogan or saying I've ever seen as far as a description of faith goes:

FAITH: NOT A LEAP IN THE DARK, BUT A WALK IN THE LIGHT.

As we read in 2nd Corinthians:

We walk by faith, not by sight.

And as we sang this morning:

Let every instrument be tuned for praise!
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!
And may God give us faith to sing always
Hallelujah!

Our job is a simple one... offer praise... rejoice... and sing - because God gave us faith.

We don't need any other reason. We don't need any other evidence. We just need our faith - for God has promised that if we believe in something we can't see (which is pretty much the definition of faith) then we shall receive a gift - eternal life.

And along the way, God will do for us what needs to be done to get us to that eternal life. We just have to accept that this is true, and that the path has been revealed to us.

Knock, and the door will be opened to us. Ask, and we shall receive.

Walk by faith - not by sight.