

LENTEN SERMON SERIES: THE BIG QUESTIONS:

LENT 5: “How do we keep the faith with everything that's going on in the world?”

Texts: Psalm 137: How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

1st Peter 3: 13-17 Give account of the hope that is in you

John 12: 20-26 Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies...

I will begin with a “give away” of sorts - the most helpful answer to this question will never be a sermon.

The most effective way would be in my opinion, to sit with the person who is asking this question. Faith is a way of living, and so when this question comes up in our life it may be a call to look at our life again. How do we practice faith? Faithfulness? Hope?

The question leads to ways we practice faith, practical ways in which we stay faithful to God – and humanity – and humaneness...in this world of ours.

I will come back to that at the end of this reflection- that's the “give away”.

First though, I do want to try a bit of a more general answer and invite you into a reflection that will once more be on the lines of “who is God” (2nd sermon) and what does it mean to “keep faith” with God?

1. Life experiences behind the question

One of our most cherished beliefs is that God is in control. This belief helps us relax in moments when we feel powerless. “Let go and let God.” another attitude...how often has that helped!

“Do not worry, can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life span? Consider the birds and the lilies how God sustains them, are you not of much more worth than these?” (Matthew 6)

Trust like this may give us a sense of inner detachment from the situation, a sense of calm and hope that in God's time, things will work out. And often, they do. I do not want to make light of this.

But I am pretty sure that today's question comes from a deeper place of pain. When developments get really ugly, when world politics seem outright evil, when greed wins out over common sense, bullying over kindness, when humans on the whole seem unwilling to sacrifice comfort and short term gain for actions that would help us all survive in peace, when as today, the daily news are full of sexual assault, acts of racism, bullying ignorance, war crimes

and climate disasters, then the question of how do we keep the faith moves to a more painful level. At the heart may well be the question” How can God be in control in a world full of evil? Is God even real?”

“Everything happens for a reason and other lies I have loved” is the title of a recent book by Kate Bowler. An interview with her was recently aired on CBC's “Idea's” with Paul Kennedy.

The author is a professor at Duke Divinity School where she teaches theology.

At thirty-five, everything in Kate Bowler's life seems to point toward “blessing.” She is thriving in her job, married to her high school sweetheart, and loves life with her newborn son.

Then she is diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer.

The closeness of her death forces the author to realize that she has been subscribing to some popular ideas in current American Christianity, which she calls “the prosperity gospel”. This is a trendy form of living the Christian Faith that sees fortune as a blessing from God. This type of Christianity celebrates the American can-do spirit and focuses on God's power. She herself, she finds, was living with the conviction that she can shape her life towards God's “blessing “with “a surge of determination and hope.”

Kate is very sick, and no amount of positive thinking and prayers will shrink her tumors. What does it mean to die, she wonders, in a society that insists everything happens for a reason? How will she keep the Faith? Kate Bowler describes in her book how she is stripped of the certainty that her cancer is sent to her by God for a reason she must discover and change. Only to realize that without that certainty, life is hard but beautiful in a way it never has been before. She then gets much closer in her faith to what we call a Theology of the cross”- an understanding of the gospel that takes human suffering much more seriously than any “prosperity gospel”. I am glad the book has become a New York Times best seller. It sounds soulful, truthful, and faithful.

2. “Keeping the faith” as staying with Christ, especially through the cross

So what might it mean then, to “keep the faith” with all the evil that is going on in the world?

First:

It means we must Let go of certainties.

With Kate Bowler and countless others before her, we need to learn to accept that people of faith live with uncertainties and shattered illusions. Some of these will concern our very image of God. We realize that we must lay aside an image of God as a distant deity who is in control of everything. Some people think that if you lay aside that image you are laying aside the Christian faith. I can only say here: that is a wrong conclusion. What you are

laying aside is not the Living God revealed in Jesus, but an idol of power. Instead, you take up that image of Christ's outstretched arms on the cross, suffering with you, for you, embodying that there is love and life for you, beyond what you know in the moment of suffering.

So a mature faith will live with shattered illusions. When your illusions get shattered it does not mean you've lost your faith, it means that you are on the way to spiritual “purification” or growth. Such as the realization that God will not step into your mess and turn everything around. A person of faith will find herself stripped of assumptions about God over and over-only to be called again and again into relationship with a loving God who opens his arms wide on the cross in Jesus.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall has written a little book called “Why Christian? For those on the edge of faith-” Faith, he says, is not a set of assumptions or beliefs or doctrines we assent to. Yes, some doctrines are part of faith, but that is not faith. Faith is something that happens in a relationship. Faith is trust in the relationship God offers, the relationship God has with us...

I think its no accident that in many places in the Bible, we find a lot of language that is like language between lovers, in a couple. Language of, adoration, ecstasy, whispered confidentialities, jealousy, anger, feelings of abandonment, pleading, disappointment, and then again joy, contentment, expressions of trust and security...all that language is faithful language. You can compare Faith with a love relationship: Sometimes Faith comes to us almost automatically, as when we feel “overwhelmed” by God's beauty and love; but other times, we make a free decision to continue in this relationship with God, even when the skies are very dark.

When a couple in trouble goes to see a marriage counsellor she often asks early on: “do you both want to save this marriage?” It takes two. Its a bit like that in our relationship with God. We have heard that God thinks we humans are worth the effort to keep up the relationship – but do we think its worthwhile to put in our effort?

When times are difficult for us, Keeping the Faith is not to have all kinds of good feelings, but to making a decision to continue relationship with God.

You trust that God is worth it, even in times when you have doubt of God's faithfulness.

See- Psalm 137, where the homesick Israelites cry in exile in Babylon- "how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

It is told of some Jews in Auschwitz, that one night they put God on trial. They charge him with cruelty and betrayal. Like Job they found no consolation in the usual answers to the problem of evil and suffering in the midst of this current obscenity. They could find no excuse for God, no extenuating circumstances, so they found him guilty. The Rabbi pronounced the verdict. Then he looked up and said that the trial was over: it was time for the evening prayer.

Sometimes we don't understand anything anymore. We keep the relationship with God because we must, for our own sanity. That can happen when evil in the world is very strong for us.

Second:

We keep faith by what I would call "Clinging to Christ". Remember that passage when Jesus asks the 12 disciples (after a lot of others reportedly had left in disappointment): You do not want to leave too, do you? Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. (John 6: 67-68). Out of Peter's mouth come the words that make so much sense to me even in today's world: to whom shall we go? What better way could there be than the way of Christ to bring life to all?

The main mark of Faith is that you love Christ, his way of teaching, healing, welcoming all. Keeping the Faith means to me that I recognizing the immense relevance of Jesus' way of living and dying for today's world. In other words, you can be all kinds of things, worried, angry, fearful, even hopeless at times and still "cling to Christ". But You can't keep the faith if you find him boring.

And there is one more major thing: That cross. Even if you (like all of us Christians) will never fully understand it – one thing in our faith is sure: all the suffering in the world today is also in Golgotha. Golgotha can't just be a thing from the past. Golgotha is where God is hanging now with all those countless others who are innocent and dying young-

With everything that is happening in the world today- how could we not love a God who is right in the midst of the pain? If we don't cling to Christ on the cross and Christ risen with everything that's happening in our world today,

who do we cling to?

To keep the faith with everything that's happening in our world is not identical with to be “always hopeful” or “have a positive attitude” (*sure that does not hurt either!*); to keep the faith with everything that's happening in our world is to cling to Christ and to love his way of non violence and gentle love . And when we need to, in faith we cry and rant.

We are shaped by what we love, we are shaped by whom we choose to love- and so, we need to look now at faith practices.

3. Practically what that could look like

-You can't just go on living like everyone else. It will be difficult to keep the faith if you make oodles of money, vacation constantly in the sheltered havens of the wealthy, drive a gas guzzler and take everyone to court who dares to disagree with you.

The love for Christ shapes us so that we will want to put ourselves in the kind of places where Jesus was then. If someone says to me, “I can't find God in the world” I usually say, “tell me about the God you can't find” “which God?” Often they think of a God in glory and power, not of the God who is in Jesus on the cross.

How do we keep the faith- it all boils down to the practices that shape us.

Ask yourself or ask a spiritual director/guide to explore with you:

What practices dominate my life now?

What practices might I adopt to become closer to Christ?

Do I need to learn more about the Christ?

Do I need to copy him more? And what could that look like for me today?

Do I live alone, or in community? There are as many questions as there are people. Each one's faith journey is different. This is why it is most helpful to have a soul friend or spiritual director help you with this.

What practices make you more hopeful?

Personally, I find gardening a most spiritual practice. It connects me with the mystery which our faith proclaims: to let go of the desire to control, and to be attentive to how God can transform us. Just as a simple seed, when its buried,

gets transformed into a marvellous plant...

Just as Jesus let go of his desire to live, and gave his life up, and was taken through Easter morning into a new dimension of life...so can we savour lessons in the garden (if only we have eyes to see match what we see there with the scriptures guidance!)...

Which leads to the practice of wondering:

“Wonder and other Survival skills” is the intriguing title of an essay collection put out by the Orion Magazine. Wonder- a survival skill?

Absolutely. Most certainly a spiritual survival skill.

Even the humble dandelion that pokes its head through the crack in the asphalt is reason for wonder and can inspire love for God.

Being on the faith journey as a community, and not alone, means we are so lucky we can help one another through hard times – if only we dare to be vulnerable with one another!

As an example of this openness and vulnerability I wish to close with this note I also found on one of the blue paper strips:

“I'm not sure I have a crisis of faith but if I did, I would simply have to listen to beautiful church music. Lovely music often brings me to my knees. Evidence of great humility and loving kindness also make my spirit rejoice and if I had a crisis of faith, would restore me.”

Thank you, friends in Christ.

Rev. Elisabeth Bachem-Jennings, March 18, 2018 St. George & St. Andrew United Church Annapolis Royal, NS