

“THE GIFT OF FAITH”

II Kings 5:1-15b; Titus 3:4-7

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

Faith may be among the most difficult topics to discuss in our culture today. It is easier to say what it isn't than to say what it is. It isn't, for instance, blind optimism or illogical beliefs, as some atheists like to characterize it. Faith is not opposed to science or facts. Faith may be a key factor in some healings, but a failure to be healed doesn't indicate a failure of faith. When people study various religions, they learn the doctrines of the “faith,” but this will never by itself bring understanding to faith.

When faith is mentioned in the public sphere, it is sometimes associated with the more negative aspects of our world. The Christian Faith is equated with Crusaders who slaughtered innocent people in their quest to regain the Holy City, with the forced confessions of the Inquisition, with anti-semitic violence, or conversions of the natives by sword point as Christianity moved into the new world. The faith is associated with Islamic Extremism and Christian judgmentalism. We have a lot of baggage to clear out of the way before we can talk about what faith is.

Faith is not a doctrine, an institution, or a justification for heinous actions. Faith is neither knowledge, nor intuition, neither fact nor feeling. But I am not concerned with what others may claim incorrectly, rather I want us to think about faith in its more positive sense. I want to talk briefly this morning about the gift that is faith and the gift that faith is.

The first thing to say is that, in one sense, no one comes by faith honestly. Titus is clear about this. God saves us “not because of any work of righteousness, but according to mercy. The Spirit is poured out on us by Jesus Christ. We are justified by grace. Titus doesn't use the word faith here, but it's clear that faith comes in light of the “goodness and lovingkindness of God.” It begins there. Faith is gifted to us.

And there's really no other way that it can come to us, because we resist it. We are like Naaman, who seeks healing on his terms. He considers himself a person of some importance. He is offended that Elisha doesn't meet him face to face, but instead sends a messenger. He is offended that the means for his healing don't emphasize his strength or prowess. Like Naaman, our expectations get in the way of the gift.

Martin Luther thought if he studied the faith enough, his understanding would make him right with God. And when this failed, he thought if he disciplined his body, mortifying the flesh, his spirit might rise up to God. And when this failed, he didn't know what to do. And then one day, he woke up.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night and claims to recognize in Jesus one who has come from God. But Jesus tells him that “no one can see the kingdom of God without

being born from above.” Well, how does one do that? One doesn’t... “the Spirit blows where it chooses” Those who hear it have no idea where the Spirit came from or where the Spirit was off to, but now they’re awake.

Naaman brings with him a king’s ransom expecting that this will be enough to purchase a healing. The king of Israel knows that money won’t fix this problem, but he has no more faith than Naaman. His fear gets in the way. If it’s not our ego, then you can count on fear being the thing to undermine faith. These two things govern most of the relationships between countries, between labor and management, between humanity and the earth: power and fear. They disrupt all efforts to exercise good faith. But when faith arrives and is recognized and exercised, parties and people are reconciled. Life happens. We wake up.

The servants have it right. Just do this little thing Naaman. Bullying won’t bring you back to life. The prophet offers you a gift. So he does. He lets go of power and of fear and he takes seven baths... and he wakes up. Not only is he healed, but he recognizes not the prophet, but the prophet’s God.

Faith comes as a gift, but it is a gift that is always on offer. We know this especially in this season. The gift takes physical form in the infant Jesus. “He shall be called Emmanuel” writes Matthew, God with us. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” writes John, “To all who received him... he gave power to become the children of God....”

Jesus is the gift that is faith. God with us, always on offer, waiting patiently for us to stop trying to earn the gift, waiting for us to stop trusting in power or hiding in fear, waiting for us to wake up to God’s presence and love.

You can understand the most detailed and intricate theological argument and still lack faith. Faith is found, perhaps even more so, among the uneducated, the disenfranchised, the hungry, the poor. No amount of power or prestige, or position can gain faith. It is gifted.

To those who wake up to the gift by whatever mysterious means, a whole world of possibilities opens up; not because faith is boundless optimism or offers certainty about the future, but because faith is a relationship that says we are never alone. Faith sees the kingdom of God or sees God in the kingdom. Faith is not certainty but rests on the conviction that God does not abandon us. Faith can exist among a sea of doubts because it sees one who has endured every trial we might face. Faith leads us to a life of peace and joy whether we are healed or not, whether we are delivered from our present dilemma or not. Faith is alert to God in all circumstances. It sees the divine in the Christ child and it sees the Christ child in the hungry, the thirsty and all those who long for the peace of God. Faith is a way of seeing God in the world and a way of seeing the world through the eyes of God.

You can't buy it and you can't earn it, but you can receive it and live into it. Like the shepherds, you can take the hasty journey to Bethlehem and see the wonder about which you were told. Or you could take the long journey, following a star, to worship the child who is God-with-us.

Wake up! Come and see what God is doing. Come, be numbered among the faithful and know the gift of God's love for you and for the world.

Amen.