

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Lent 5
April 7, 2019

Faith without Feeling Isaiah 43:16-21

Summary

Some of the great saints admitted to having spiritual dry periods and religious doubts. What they learned was that faith in God is not so much about feeling God as it is about living God. Our own spiritual dry periods can teach us the same lesson.

We do not have to look very far - perhaps no further than ourselves — to know that our faith is not always as strong as we might like it to be. Even believing people have their doubts. When we are honest, we might do well to pray with the father whose son Jesus healed of seizures. We read in Mark's gospel that after the healing, the father said to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

As we listen to talk radio or to some of the people with whom we work or live, if we read the editorials and letters to the editor in our local newspaper or scroll through the blogs on the internet we see a snapshot of society. In that snapshot, we see skepticism about what is true. We see cynicism about what is good. Seldom, in that snapshot, is there an image of a loving God in the picture, not even in the background.

This is not to say that most people are bad. It is not to say that most are atheist or even agnostic. It doesn't mean that they have no faith. Rather, their faith is so far in the background that they become God-starved, and they do not even know the cause of their hunger. This can happen to anyone, you and me included.

Mother Teresa, known the world over and sometimes referred to as the saint of Calcutta, spent her adult life caring for the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta, India. She died in 1997, and 10 years later, a book was published containing her writings over the course of 66 years.

TIME Magazine published a cover story on the book that shocked some and troubled many. It seems that this icon of holiness had lived in doubt and spiritual dryness for most of those 66 years.

She wrote in one of her letters, "... for me the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see — listen and do not hear — the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me." She lamented that in community prayer, she simply mouthed the words as we ourselves might do from time to time, and admitted that her private prayer was almost nonexistent. In all that time as she ministered to sick and dying people in the streets, she could not feel God.

She was not alone in that kind of experience. Among others, two great Christian mystics, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, wrote of their own dark nights of the soul. Going back further, when Jesus invited St. Peter to walk on water, that disciple had his doubts and began to sink. Sinking feelings may have found their way into our own experience at one time or another. We have our own fears and doubts even as we recite our creeds. We may not doubt the phrases of the creed. We may not even think of their meaning, but we may often doubt the promise made in today's reading from the prophet Isaiah.

This reading has something to say to any of us who are plagued by doubt or who wonder at the way the world unfolds. We find ourselves living with fear or even becoming cynical in the face of injustice, corporate greed, political infighting or war. We may feel at times as if we are drowning in a sea of fear over health issues. We may feel that we are in financial water that is over our heads. But Isaiah reminds us that ours is a God who can open a path through the sea.

We have heard that Jesus promised to be with us all days but we often forget that promise when we reel under the loneliness brought on by the death of a spouse, a parent, a child, some other family member or a good friend. We may not feel God at all in such times. Praying may seem futile if not impossible.

But faith is not about feeling. Jesus did not leave us a Church of the Good Strokes. Rather faith is about doing. It is about living as God would have us live even when God is seemingly distant. Mother Teresa's faith was not to be found in her feelings, her chapel or even her head. It was found in the way she ministered to God's children dying in the streets. Doubting or a lack of feeling is not necessarily a lack of faith.

Remember what Thomas told his fellow apostles when they excitedly informed him that Jesus had been there, that Jesus was still around? His response would tag him forever as doubting Thomas. Perhaps Thomas received a bum rap. He was not the only one in the bunch to have his doubts.

Many searchers for God and truth through history have had such doubts, and we have ours as well. Our doubts, our fears and even our cynicism in the face of many of life's challenges place us with Thomas, with Mother Teresa and with so many others whose names we do not know. Often we don't know them because discussion about faith and especially discussion about doubts about faith aren't often our topic in our churches. And in society in general, some actually brag that they never talk about religion.

Okay, leave religion out of the conversation but if we would bring God into it, we might all gain. We would find out that we are not alone in a spiritual sea. We may be affirmed that despite our doubts, God is there for us.

We may live in a sea of problems that appears larger than anyone can resolve. The water of life may seem to be over our heads. God does not promise the economy will be stable. God does not promise to remove the greed that exacerbates the unjust distribution of wealth. We are not promised relational bliss or perpetual good health. We certainly are not promised that we will never lose our treasured possessions or those whom we love. We are not even assured that we will not lose the religious securities that have brought us along. But we are promised that we will be taken care of in any of these circumstances.

As we just read from Isaiah, we are a people formed by God and for God. God may not take away the difficulties faced by his own people, but God will take care of his own people in their difficulties. We see this when people are healed in spirit even though the illness they carry is not cured. We see it in those who have lost loved ones.

Though the loved one does not return, the grieving person of faith, even with pain in his or her heart, goes on to live past the loss. We see it in people who suffer a loss of something they would never let go of only to find something that is better for them.

The people of Israel, after many years in the desert, arrived in the Promised Land where God had led them. There, they eventually built a temple in which they presumably felt the presence of God. But as time went on, their land was taken from them and their temple was destroyed. They had to learn that faith was not about feeling God but rather it was about living God. Isaiah told them that in their emptiness, God could now put water in the desert of their lives and rivers in their wasteland.

Learning that faith in God is not about feeling God but about living God was the lesson of Mother Teresa's life. She may not have felt God in front of an altar but she lived God on her knees in the streets as she looked into the eyes of the sick and held the hands of the dying. We are called to nothing less. We are called to live God in the streets of our own lives.

In doing this we not only live past our fears, but we also become the instruments by which God continues to make a path through the seas of injustice, violence and hopelessness. We are the hands by which God flows rivers through the wasteland of poverty, and we are the ones through whom God provides water in the deserts of fear and loneliness. This is our faith. God can take care of our doubts. Amen!