



Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

A Confessing Church in the PCUSA

Foundations of Faith Christmas Eve Message 2019

Sermon by: Robert Austell
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What is faith made of? How do you get it? How do you experience it?

You've heard four substantial scripture readings tonight. And while they do not cover all that makes up faith, they cover a lot of ground. I'd like to suggest that these four parts of God's story are like the four legs of a stool. They provide the stability, foundation, and support for a living and vital faith that makes a difference. I'd call them building blocks, but they don't necessarily build on each other so much as inter-relate to one another to create a steady and stable faith. They are named in your bulletin, but let me remind you of what you've heard: promises, news, birth, and witness.

PROMISES

The first of these parts of God's story is truly God's part because it precedes us. God's PROMISES reach back before Christ, back to when the world began. God created and it was good. God created us and it was very good. And we messed up... as we are wont to do. But God did not abandon us. God came after us out of love. And that's a good thing because we were not going to be able to undo our mess on our own. And so as you read the pages of the Old Testament you read what God was like. And contrary to the rumor that the Old Testament God is mean and the New Testament God is nice, it's all the same God. In those pages of Old Testament scripture God is compassionate, patient, long-suffering, merciful, and good. And God promises to do something about the mess that is humanity. Now this isn't always the first thing we hear about God or Jesus or faith. But at some point it becomes part of the stable foundation of faith, to realize that whatever faith we have or experience or are considering comes after God's initiative to love us, seek us out, and reconcile us to Himself.

NEWS

The second part of the story is the NEWS. This is the message of Christmas: Jesus is born, God is with us, something holy has happened. It is “good news of great joy for the whole world.” To start considering Christian faith we first must hear the news. And then we have to figure out what to do with it! I appreciate that Mary was ‘perplexed’ but she also “kept pondering.” I will be the first to admit that the story of Jesus can be perplexing when we first encounter it. But it’s worth pondering... and pondering some more! We read together Mary’s response to the news: she praised God and marveled that God would do such a thing. If you read the full account of Mary’s prayerful response, she also recounts God’s promises to those who came before her.

BIRTH (Encounter)

The third part of the story is the BIRTH. The fancy word for it is the “incarnation,” which is just a big word that means “in flesh” or “as a human being.” It may seem like this is the same as the news, but this is the reality the news describes. Faith can begin at believing the news, but it also involves an encounter with Jesus. Just hearing the news without encountering Jesus is like reading poetry about love but not ever being in love. We can believe in it and want it, but the experience is the greater reality. For Mary and Joseph, the birth of Jesus was the reality the angel told them about. The shepherds also heard the news from angels, and then they went to see for themselves. Perhaps another way to talk about this part of the story of faith is as the ENCOUNTER. Faith is hearing about Jesus, but it is also encountering Jesus.

How do you do that? ...especially since there is no longer a stable and manger to go visit! Many people experience the power and presence of God in creation... in the mountains, at the seashore, in nature. And scripture says that all nature does reveal God, but only in a general way. The specifics are in scripture and in the community of faith. And like the humble stable and manger, the focus should be on Christ himself. That is our hope when you worship with us, that you will see Jesus and experience the presence of God.

WITNESS (Change)

The fourth part of the story is WITNESS. In the shepherd's story they heard the news and went and encountered Jesus. But they also left with the fourth part of the story of faith. They shared the story of what they had seen and heard and they worshiped God. In other words, the news and the encounter made a difference! Not only could they not keep it to themselves, it kindled faith to praise and worship God. I'm not saying that in order to have faith you must start handing out tracts to your neighbors; I'm saying that faith changes us and it's noticeable! Faith leads us to worship and it leads to a changed life.

What is faith made of?

Let me say again that these are not building blocks. You don't master one and move on to the next. I've been studying scripture all my life and I still find new things to learn about God and God's promises. I have heard the message about Jesus all my life, but continue to find new things to ponder, explore, and seek to understand. I first encountered Jesus as a child, again as a teenager, again as a young adult, and more times since then. And God is still changing my life with this news and this Savior. It's never one-and-done, but an ongoing process of growing and maturing in faith.

At any church service I want to make sure that we share the news about Jesus and we invite you to encounter Jesus in some way. And most Sundays we try to explore some of the back-story, some of the character and promises of God. That's part of what church is for – to help folks connect with faith and grow in faith. And my earnest prayer is that God will cultivate faith in you and your life will be changed for the good. And I believe that God does change people's lives for the good. So, whether this is all new to you or has framed it in a new way or is familiar territory, the news and the invitation is the same as it was in the field 2000 years ago: I proclaim good news of great joy for all the people; come and see, come and meet this Savior who is Christ the Lord. May God give you ears to hear and hearts to respond to this good, good news! Amen.

Christmas Prayer

*Heavenly Father,
it is humbling to realize that you knew us and loved
us before we drew our first breath.*

*It is even more humbling to realize that you have pursued
wandering humanity through time and culture and shadows and shame
because you love us with an infinite and piercingly bright love.*

*As we approach this day of giving and receiving gifts,
as we remember magi who brought gifts to the Christ-child,
we give thanks for your simple gifts, your profound gifts,
of faith, hope, and love.*

*Thank you for the gift of faith,
made possible out of your own steadfast promises,
spoken to us through prophets, apostles, and angels,
encountered in Jesus Emmanuel, God-made-flesh to us and for us,
that we might know hope, be changed, and be redeemed.*

*Thank you for the hope born out of your gift of faith,
hope shining like a beacon amidst the shadows,
blazing-bright defiance of sin and death.*

*And thank you for the gift of love,
shown and given to us through faith, through hope,
that we might love you, love others, be at peace, and offer peace.
Faith, hope, and love – gifts we receive, gifts we give.*

*We love you, thank you, and celebrate you this night,
even as we await the dawning of the birth-day of Jesus,
born in the straw, born in love, born the Light of the World.*

Amen.