Let Them See You

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

*Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see.*

 *Hebrews 11:1, Common English Bible*

 Has anyone here ever heard of the *Stockdale Paradox*? I confess that I hadn’t until I read an interesting article about it by Bruce Maples, someone I hadn’t any knowledge of before reading the article. Anyhow, a bit of background about Stockdale will provide necessary background for understanding the Stockdale Paradox. Jim Stockdale was a navy admiral who was a prisoner of war during the Viet Nam War. Stockdale was interviewed at one time and asked how he was able to live through such a horrible experience, while others seemingly younger and more fit wound up dying in the prison. Stockdale noted that the prisoners who were either complete optimists or complete pessimists had the most trouble surviving. It was the ones like himself that combined realism with a long view that finally made it out.

The interviewer, author Jim Collins, notes that great companies approach their world in a way that is very similar to how Stockdale approached being a POW. Collins names the principle the Stockdale Paradox, and outlines it thusly:

*You must retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties.*

*AND at the same time…*

*You must confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.*

 That’s the Stockdale Paradox. What would happen, however, if we tweaked this principle in the context of our faith and put it this way: *You must retain faith that* ***God*** *will prevail in the end, AND, at the same time, you must confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they may be.*

 At this point, if you accept this principle as true and in accordance with our Christian understanding, we can begin to talk about faith as I understand it.

 Faith, we are told by the author of the Book of Hebrews, is “*the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see.* I once was channel surfing a long while ago and came across a televangelist and so-called faith healer. This guy, in his gauche red suit, was going on and on about how God gave him the ability to heal others who truly believed. He elicited testimonials from members of his audience (I am not certain about the veracity of those witnesses, or whether they were planted in the audience) about how they were miraculously healed. He would ask others to come forward and he would push their foreheads and those people would fall backward, fully healed. Then he asked members of his viewing audience if they wanted healing as well. He placed his hand up in front of the camera and asked viewers to place their foreheads onto the television screen for healing. He then asked them to send in contributions to support his ministry, almost claiming that healing would not occur until they did so. That’s not my understanding of faith.

 So then, what do the rest of us do? We recoil at such nonsense, and are repulsed by such charlatans, we abandon any notion that asks us to believe. We become cynical. We leave out the question of faith, we turn it into some sort of intellectual agreement, we just try to get people to play nice and be good to each other. And we surely don’t challenge each other to act as if God might still be, you know, DOING anything.

This is where I ask you to consider the Stockdale Paradox I outlined earlier. Re-read it with the change I suggested, that God is going to prevail in the end. Now ask yourself, if I really believe that God and God’s ways win in the end, what does it mean for me today? Should it affect my thinking, or my actions? Should it change the decisions I make?

I am convinced that we miss the central truth of Hebrews 11, this great teaching about faith. One of the temptations of reading this great passage, in which the writer offers one example of great faith after another, and we think, that’s not me. Noah? Sarah and Abraham? Moses? Come on; that’s the biblical hall of fame. My faith does not compare in any way, shape or form to those giants of faith. No way.

But what if the real point is that all these people shared one important attribute — they all believed that God is going to prevail in the end, AND that such a conviction should inform the decisions they make and the actions they take.

Let’s take it a step further. Let’s frame up some situations using the second part of the Stockdale Paradox, and see what faith says.

*“My workplace is full of back-biting and fights to get ahead” — but God will prevail — and I am connected to God — so I will love even the back-biters and find my security in God.*

*Our country is going to hell in a handbasket. Troubled people are killing innocent people indiscriminately out of hate and suspicion. But God will prevail and so I will continue to raise my voice for sane gun laws, become active in places that will make a difference, and use my vote to bring greater sanity to places of power.*

*“My family is falling apart” — but God will prevail — and I am called to bring the love of God into my family — so I will neither gloss over the issues, nor give up on the possibility of re-birth, but will be a constant source of love, openness, and honesty.* Frankly, reading back over this reflection, I’m not sure I have been able to say what is in my heart, so let me take one more crack at it: an adult version of faith combines a central, core belief in the existence and ultimate triumph of God and God’s ways, with a realistic appraisal of the world today. It then acts in accordance with God’s ways, even when it seems counter-intuitive, in order to affect the current reality and move it toward God’s reality.

 There is a great theological word to which I would like to introduce you. It is a shorthand way of talking about this way to understand how faith lives. The word is *prolepsis.* Here is what it means. Prolepsis means to live as if some future reality is already here, knowing full well that it isn’t yet, and to do so intentionally so that we may bring the future into the present. Let me say it another way. We hear Jesus’ parables of the Kingdom of God. You know, those stories that he begins by saying, *The Kingdom of God is like. . .* When we hear those teachings, we realize we are not there yet. But what if we live as if it **were already** true? What if we live in the reality of the prodigal son? Of acknowledging the reality of God amazing grace? Or the Good Samaritan? What if we live in vulnerability and reach out to people in need, even at risk of our own well-being? That’s what prolepsis is. That, in fact, is what faith means. To live as if the future reign of God is already here and now, acknowledging that it isn’t; that’s faith.

 Faith is not something we have to have “enough of” in order to do things, or change things, or be this or that. It is not some sort of magic potion, or some mental fake-out. It is, instead, a quiet, firm conviction that in spite of whatever evidence our current reality tries to throw at us … there is a God, that God is loving and good, and that the loving and good God is both present in all we do and are and will ultimately prevail, no matter how grim the present circumstance may be.

And when I think of faith like this, the overwhelming image I have is of a substance, almost a solid, right in the center of my body, that is both unchanging and energy-giving. It may ebb and flow, but it still continues to be there, grounding each of my points in time to the eternal.

Now back to the Stockdale Paradox. When he was living through the hell of a Vietnamese prison, Admiral Stockdale woke up every morning to three thoughts:

* I’m still in this horrible place.
* Someday, though, I’m going to get out.
* If that’s so, what should I do and how should I act today?

That’s the essence of faith. May each of us do the same, as we consider what the reality of God and our faith in that God mean for each of our days.