**Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**

**St. Clement’s, with Mt. Olivet**

* + [Genesis 15:1-6](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=274)
  + [Psalm 33:12-22](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=274)
  + [Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=274)
  + [Luke 12:32-40](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=274)

I have a favourite picture on my study wall of a woodcut engraving of churchgoers nodding in their pews. In large type, the caption says “There is a fine line between a long sermon and a hostage situation.”

I try to take that maxim to heart. But one benefit of having a captive audience that I do take advantage of is seizing the chance to wax enthusiastic to you about the books I am currently enjoying. Two weeks ago I was sitting in Delany’s reading a spiritual memoir called *Finding God in the Waves* and I was fervently hoping I could use some of its content in a sermon one day. Well, lo and behold, when I checked today’s lectionary readings, I couldn’t imagine a better scriptural fit for some of the important messages the book contains.

The memoir was written by Mike McHargue, a man in his early 40s who was raised in the fundamentalist evangelical tradition. As a bullied child on the school ground, his close relationship with Jesus gave him great comfort, and as Michael grew older he became more and more active in his church, marrying a fellow believer, having two children, and building a deeply satisfying life around his faith community. From the first, he was taught that the bible was the inerrant word of God, and that it was to be read literally. Anything that was troubling you – illness, vexing questions about God-approved genocide in the early scriptures, relationship discord – could all be addressed by prayer, and more prayer. If your troubles didn’t go away, you probably weren’t praying hard enough, or sincerely enough.

But things started to crumble for him when his parents divorced. This was so counter to what he believed right, that for the first time he started scouring the Bible, reading it in its entirety instead of just selected verses highlighted in sermons and greeting cards and worship services. The more he read, the more the Bible didn’t make sense, and God didn’t make sense. Part of the problem was that he was someone who also loved science, and he had to face the fact that the wonderful knowledge provided by modern archeology and cosmology could not be reconciled with the biblical account he had been taught.

In aching detail, he describes what it was like to gradually lose his faith. Most sad of all was that for two years he couldn’t talk about his newfound doubts with anyone in his church or even his family – doing so would have cost him his friendships and his community. His questions would have been seen as an affront; something to be prayed away by church elders as if they were an illness or a threat. The only people he could freely engage with, and he did so anonymously, were members of online atheist forums.

So the first thing I want to say, and I want to say it strongly, is that I pray none of you in this community ever feel you have to keep your thoughts buried. This is not a place in which your wonderings, convictions, doubts or questions have to be kept hidden from view. I can’t think of anything more isolating than having to censor one’s self in this way, and I can’t think of anything more spiritually deadening. I love that we have the freedom to believe differently from each other, and that we understand that our individual beliefs may change shape as our spiritual journey unfolds. What inspires me is not *what* people here believe, but *how* they believe - the commitment and engagement they bring to their life of faith.

Indeed, contemporary spirituality has come alive in a new way by shifting the focus from statements of belief to practices of faith. In today’s scripture readings, we are repeatedly encouraged to have *faith*; there is, however, not a lot of insistence about what we must *believe*. As I said to the young people, God knows jolly well that we can’t count the stars. Nor does God expect us to; nor does God provide us the answer. The Hebrews passage calls faith “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” and praises Abraham for setting out in faith, “not knowing where he was going.” We aren’t asked to believe exactly how the world was made, or to have the precise GPS coordinates for our destination, but simply to understand that “what is seen was made from things that are not visible,” and that God’s hand is active throughout creation and our unfolding lives.

So how do we define faith, if we don’t define it as believing the Bible literally or ascribing to every single doctrine of one’s church? Faith, I believe, is making the choice to participate in a lively relationship with God and to help that relationship flourish through attention and prayer. It was making that choice that ultimately brought Michael, the author of my book, back to enthusiastic faith in God, if not back to the church of his childhood.

I really enjoyed reading about Michael’s renewed relationship with the Divine, and his research about the role our brain plays in our spiritual life. He writes: “People who believe and pray daily invest tremendous neurological real estate in maintaining a model for God and use that network as part of the way they experience reality.”

Does this mean that we create God through our thinking? No, I don’t think so. It means we can make a conscious choice to live a spirit-filled life that is alive with the promises and possibilities offered by trust in God’s transcendent presence. In the same way we can nurture a relationship with an old friend and see it grow and produce tangible fruit, being engaged in a committed relationship with God cannot help but alter the shape and course of our own reality.

Michael’s research revealed that the most important practice that helps us experience the reality of God is dedication to prayer or meditation. Both of these disciplines literally rewire our brain. People who pray regularly have heightened activity in the areas of the brain responsible for focus, willpower, compassion and empathy, and reduced responsiveness in the amygdala, the part of the brain that fires up our anger. Michael writes: “In the case of people who meditate on a loving God, the idea of God becomes part of how they process reality – and this has profound effects on their behaviour. When you believe that God loves you and loves others, it’s easier to take risks and to forgive people. It’s not enough to simply believe in God, because only prayer and meditation will turn that belief into a neural network that changes your outlook and behaviour.”

Again, we see this amply illustrated in today’s scripture readings. In the Psalm we read “our heart is glad in him, because we trust his holy name.” In Hebrews, we read of Abraham’s descendants living in faith and “making it clear that they are foreigners on the earth, seeking a homeland. They desire a better country, a heavenly one, and therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them.” This tells me that when we consciously offer God space in our brains, in our hearts, in our lives, God fills it and fills it abundantly.

According to the reading, even those Hebrew people who died in faith, not yet receiving God’s promises, saw the promises from a distance and greeted them. That is, even when particular hopes do not come to fruition in our lifetime, our lives will still have been shaped for good by our faith in God’s loving presence.

So the second thing I want to say is that our hearts and minds are intricately, wonderfully designed to know and love God. And we best know God not by studying theology but by making time to welcome God into our lives. We do that on a Sunday morning, but if we don’t make time for regular prayer or meditation during the week as well, we risk our faith becoming simply an intellectual exercise. So in the days to come, I encourage us all to refresh our relationship with the Holy One, and to experience anew God as the ground of our very being. Philippa and I are always glad to know what spiritual resources you may be looking for, so if you have been hankering for a prayer workshop or series or meditation group, please do give us your thoughts.

In a moment we will stand and say the Nicene Creed, a practice that may feel to you like a contradiction of everything I have just said about being accepting of doubts and questions. The three authorized creeds are statements of doctrinal belief, some parts of which you may agree with wholeheartedly and some parts which you may have doubts about or outright resistance to. But I like to think of the creed as the holy campfire around which Christians have gathered for nearly 2,000 years. The creedal campfire beckoned us into a circle of belonging and protected us from the perils of night; it provided the light by which we have told our spiritual stories, shared our songs, and taught our young. But when we look deep into the flames, each of us likely sees something a little different, and that’s part of the glory of being a uniquely fashioned child of God.

I am always interested to know what you see in the sacred fire, so if you ever want to pull up a camp chair and break open the marshmallows, I would love to listen to your faith story – just know that I don’t expect tidy endings or resolved dilemmas. We are all of us on a journey, and, as Abraham’s descendants, we don’t always know where we are going. It is, however, very good to travel in the company of others.

A beloved mystic of the 20th century, Thomas Merton, was also happy to acknowledge the mysteries of faith. So let us close with this prayer of Merton’s, which has become a favourite for many:

My Lord God,   
I have no idea where I am going.   
I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.   
Nor do I really know myself,   
and the fact that I think that I am following   
your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.   
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.   
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.   
And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me,   
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

*- Peggy Trendell-Jensen*