

“Where does faith start?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
January 26, 2020

*Psalm 27: 1, 4-9 and Matthew 4:12-23*

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Last month, a few weeks before Christmas, I sat in my study with a woman who was facing a crisis. She said that her whole world felt like it was falling apart. She had always been so strong, and that strength had been enough... until now. We didn't know each other; she hadn't been to a church since childhood; hadn't prayed in years; faith never felt very natural to her. But suddenly, she had found herself crying out to God for help.

We talked. My Kleenex box got a little emptier. And she asked me about faith. She said she could remember people in her life, a grandmother, an aunt, who had had such deep faith. They went to church every Sunday, helped others, read the Bible, and believed in God's love, even in the face of adversity. It was like no matter how bad life got, they were holding onto something; they were standing on a rock. And it gave them this untouchable joy, this peace.

She asked me, “Are there just some people who are predisposed to faith, people with a God gene? Is there something in them that makes them special?” She asked this because she felt like she had missed out on whatever gene these special people had, the gene that made them so confident in the presence of God.

We know the kind of people she was talking about. I remember sitting with Jane Lumb a few weeks before she died. She knew she was dying. And I asked her where God was, for her. With a toothy smile and a chuckle, she said, “Oh, he's right where he's always been. He's here, with me.” It's not like these people had easier lives. I think of Midge Drummond, the first woman elder in this church, a beacon of joy and faith; her first husband died in World War II, just days before she gave birth to their first child. How do some people, like Jane or Midge, feel God so truly?

We might be asking this question a lot right now, as pews get emptier. A lot of us, a lot of the time, we don't feel like believers, like disciples. We wrestle with doubts. Big ones. We feel pulled in other directions, pulled by competing priorities: family, job, media, entertainment. We find ourselves talking to God less and less. Sometimes, the world, it just feels like too much. And we think, you know, we're just not like those people before us, or those other people still in church, those saints with the unshakeable faith.

There's a story about a priest, an evangelist, and a minister who went fishing one day. They rowed out to the middle of a big pond in their creaky old boat. Morning went by, and still not a single fish had been caught. Around noon the evangelist stands up and says he needs to go to the bathroom, so he climbs out of the boat, right there in the middle of the pond, and walks on the water to the shore. Ten minutes later, he comes back, walking on the water again, and climbs

into the boat. Then the minister decides he needs to go to the bathroom too, so he climbs out of the boat and walks on the water to the shore. He too comes back the same way ten minutes later.

The priest is amazed! He stares at his two colleagues in ministry and decides that his faith is just as strong as theirs, so surely he can walk on the water too. He stands up, steps out of the boat, and... splash... he sinks. As he's thrashing in the water, trying to pull himself back into the boat, the evangelist looks at the minister and says, "I suppose we should have told him where the rocks were."<sup>1</sup>

Appearances, in other words, can be deceiving. What seems so easy for someone else may be a lot harder than we perceive. But this story also invites us to ask: Where are the rocks? The ones that lead us across the waters? Where does faith find its foothold? Where does faith start?

Growing up, I thought of faith as a combination of trust and belief. Faith meant I believed this, or that. It was a choice to hold certain ideas as true. Jesus Christ is my Savior, the Son of God, crucified and risen, and so on.

That, however, is not where faith starts in the Gospel of Matthew. We just read the story of how Jesus calls his first disciples. And I am struck by the fact that his invitation to faith says nothing about what they believe, or don't believe. He doesn't teach them anything. There's no orthodoxy quiz. He doesn't ask them to subscribe to certain fundamental beliefs. He doesn't argue theology with them. He has no tract in hand as he asks if they've accepted Jesus as their personal savior. The teachings, of course, will come; they're mentioned in some of the very next verses. But right now, at the beginning of faith, all he says is: Come, follow me. He invites them to walk with him, to behold for themselves a life with Jesus. He invites them into an experience.

They watch this man go among the sick and the hurting, holding and loving the people whom the world forgot about a long time ago. They eat with him. They witness his kindness, his honesty, his anger at injustice and hypocrisy, the way he talks to people. They see how he's willing to suffer for people, how he's not looking for power or wealth. He becomes their friend, and in those moments—of unexpected love and joy, humility and justice—they come to experience God.

It's the desire we hear in the Psalmist today: "to live in the house of the Lord... to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in the Lord's temple... Your face, Lord, do I seek."

People like Peter and Andrew, like Midge and Jane, they weren't strong in the faith because they had it all figured out, or never doubted, or had some special God gene. They were strong in the faith because they showed up. They came to this place. They worshiped. They served others, and others took care of them when they were struggling. They experienced what this place is—a sanctuary for the lost, a community of friends, a mountain of awe and wonder, a God who loves them.

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<sup>1</sup> [ChristiansUnite.com](http://ChristiansUnite.com)

Ideas about God save no one. It's the experience of God's presence—the act of walking with God—that changes people and makes them disciples. That's the rock we've been looking for—the beginning of faith.

We get it wrong when we start with trying to convince someone, or even ourselves, to believe this or that. We should just say, "Come, follow me. Let me show you." Let me show you God at the soup kitchen, God at the protest rally, God at the funeral, God in the hospital and the prison and the homeless shelter, God in the woods at sunrise, God in a people singing and lamenting and rejoicing and loving each other.

If we want to rediscover our faith, or if we want to share faith with others, the rock we step on is the choice to follow Jesus into these experiences, these places, this life, and let God do the rest. Bring the doubts with you. All you have to do is follow, and invite others to follow. We should be inviting people every day!

But I'll tell you something else, and it's something I didn't see in this Bible story until just a few days ago, late at night, as I was thinking about my Mom, who just died, as I was feeling so much pain and doubt surging in me. I was thinking about this text, and it occurred to me that the faith of these first disciples, it started even before the experience of walking with Jesus, even before the invitation and its acceptance. Faith started when Jesus saw them.

Jesus sees the brothers Simon and Andrew long before they see him. He knows their names before they ever know his. He loves them before they even know he exists.

That's where faith starts—not in anything we do, but in what God does. And thank God, because there are times we just don't have the strength. What if all those doubts, all those dark places of hurt, where we feel so lost, what if they're not the absence of faith but the beginning of faith, when God already sees us, loves us, believes for us, even when we don't know how? God does what we cannot, until we can.

Maybe then the journey of faith—this choice to walk with Jesus—isn't so much about asking what *we* believe; maybe it's asking what God believes. **Amen.**