

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

The Gospel | Mark 8:31–38

Date | February 28, 2021



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

In the name of the Holy One whose gracious faithfulness is reckoned as our own. Amen.

Before I lived within walking distance of work, I used to take the train. Commute hours afforded me time to read, to think, or simply to unplug.

Every so often, interesting snippets pulled my attention toward someone else's conversation. I never meant to eavesdrop. But I often enjoyed what I overheard.

On one such occasion, I found myself listening in as someone described their faith to another, likening it to a practical shoe. I wondered whether they imagined those sturdy clogs so often donned by medical professionals. Or hiking boots, with ample ankle support for rugged terrain. Or perhaps even fleece-lined slides: comforting, warm, cozy.

Scripture talks about faith in many ways even if shoes don't feature among its analogies. Hebrews says "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen." Corinthians describes faith as a compelling force in our lives, akin to hope, if only slightly less significant than never-failing love that bears all things. Ephesians lifts up a weightier image, claiming faith is like a shield, helping us extinguish all the fiery darts of evil that assail us.

Mortal combat makes me squeamish but I like this image of faith as a resource we hoist high, biceps and forearms flexed as we harness its protective power. It's an action-packed picture that bolsters my courage.

To be sure, metaphors about faith only take us so far. Faith cannot be encapsulated within a single image. Just as faith itself feels elusive, even overwhelming at times.

Faith, after all, represents far more than a magic cloak, camouflaging us amid calamity. It's not simply an intellectual exercise, drawing forth our deepest commitment. Nor, do I believe, does its circuitous path, conclude at the end of our human journeys, when our camaraderie among the saints on earth draws to a chapter close. But I wonder what faith is like for you?

Like many communities that seek to place Jesus at the center, All Saints' helps us grow our faith and catalyze its energy into action, living as people "in the city, for the city" a phrase you might have heard by now. Drawn into this quest to share the love of God in Jesus Christ, we serve with relentless creativity, far beyond the confines of this block. In the company we here share, faith and service walk hand in hand with what we believe about God. Faith presses us to lean in with our whole selves, embracing transformational connections within the Body of Christ, pouring out our lives in love, just like Jesus did.

As I get to know folks new to All Saints', I often hear them describe it as a safe haven, that gives them space to explore and even to experiment with faith, supported by community. Their own stories provide a starting point for engaging Scripture and the history of Christianity, as they continue to claim what faith means to them.

Stories of God's miraculous love. Stories of movement and relocation. Stories of longing, loss, and learning. Such stories tone and stretch our spiritual muscles in the telling, as we strengthen our connection to Jesus and one another. Because in this vibrant community and throughout our diverse Christian tradition, faith never has meant only one thing. Faith itself has been the topic of intense debate.

Is faith something mustard-sized that we plant, water, and cultivate? Is it a project we work to achieve, individually and together? Is faith something God does entirely on our behalf, while we trust and wait and hope in God's purposes? Or is faith something with which we wrestle in order to know its power? Is faith our accomplishment or God's?

This debate lies behind Paul's conversation with the saints in Rome that we encounter in this morning's reading. We only get a snippet of what he's saying, but Paul lifts up Abraham as the paragon of faith. Which seems curious, since the patriarch's own story suggests his is anything but an unwavering trust in God's promises.

Still, Paul insists faith is the opposite of striving, a deep wellspring of trust and confidence in the God who empowers us to participate in divine purposes, as we step into God's unfailing faithfulness, even when our faith flails and flounders, as did the faith of our forebear Abraham.

Our reading from Genesis confirms this as we glimpse things from another angle in this perennial debate about faith. The conversation here seems perfectly polite but the backstory between God and Abraham muddies the water about who the subject of that hypothetical sentence is when it comes to the work of faith.

God's part seems the heftiest – transforming a man and a woman with one foot in the grave into the father and mother of a great nation, through whom everlasting love is revealed in covenantal relationship. For their part, Abraham and Sarah need only to walk blamelessly before God. This isn't the first instance in the story where God and Abraham have this talk. Their household has been on the move for some time, covering ground in the "Walking Blameless in the Wilderness" project.

By this point in the experiment, the dejected couple needs to hear the deal hashed out again. They have been hoping against hope, awaiting God's promise of life when all around them they see little besides a grueling journey en route to the grave.

At many points in their circuitous travels, prior to this divine desert tete-a-tete, the couple cave to fear and doubt. They make detours at deceptive mirages that seem to hold out the promise of relief. Yet God nudges them to keep walking, as if to wear their fretful energy right out. Along the way Abraham gives God earfuls, and Sarah laughs bitterly behind closed doors as they agonize over that promised child's long-desired arrival. The couple even takes matters into their own hands, enlisting Sarah's handmaid Hagar to serve as surrogate.

Rivalries, resentments, and rifts turn up the temperature in their tents.

Impatient desperation has a costly downside. Abusive actions and self-serving attitudes prove the two are anything but blameless. Genesis chapters 12-23 conveys all those juicy details. And if you haven't read their story in some time, Abraham and Sarah are interesting conversation partners to walk with in this Lenten season.

In their good company, our own disappointments, anxieties, and failings, and even our own incessant wondering when life rather than death will drive our daily rhythms, help us continue hoping against hope, walking by faith toward the new life we long for. With Abraham and Sarah, we learn: God alone truly is faithful.

Those early saints in Rome, quite like us, surely found reassurance in Paul's celebration of their lives. Because Abraham and Sarah show us that faith is a divine and human collaboration. God inspires, sustains, and manages the gaps, as we dare to walk by faith, one halting step at a time. God restores relationships. God renews promises in ways that redeem and rescue, whenever we veer away from that blameless path.

We risk each step and every encounter along the way, relying on God's faithfulness to be reckoned as our own, as we trust in the Only One who ever brings life out of death.

Jesus' own story—his life, death, and resurrection – helps reveal this work is one God does on our behalf. God frees us to participate in the promise of faith that blesses us, just like Abraham and Sarah, that we, too, might be a blessing.

Now Christians tend to have a lot to say about walking the walk and even walking the talk. But amid all my pandemic walking, talking with friends as we go along, I've been wondering whether we have much yet to discover about God's transforming power that flows in our lives when we "talk our walk" of faith. Whether we dare to tell our stories in virtual or physical space, it's one way to enter an ancient and ever-unfolding conversation, that really isn't about debate, in the end, but rather thanksgiving.

Such a grateful posture—with our lips as in and lives—reveals how we are growing in the exercise of our faith, in collaboration with the God whose promises never fail. Building spiritual muscle, after all, is not very different from developing the muscles of our physical bodies. Time, attention, effort, care, and community make that process possible and powerful.

I've grown strong hearing your stories of faith circulating through our online Lenten meditation series and in snippets shared in small groups throughout this past pandemic year. I imagine our experiences could fill entire volumes and overflow in countless Instagram feeds. Sharing our faith stories with one another can be both contagious and salutary.

On account of your faith, I keep trying on new images. Because faith sometimes feels like a flower, and a wild garden, teeming with life, and a steep and winding mountain path. Such images prod me to seize the opportunities I am given to flex my faith and move beyond words into actions, loving and serving in the name of Jesus Christ.

This gift of life is one I aspire to steward with creativity and joy. Much like another cherished centenarian whose walk of faith quite literally offered itself in generous service to the world. On any given day in lockdown during 2020, you might have glimpsed British war veteran Captain Sir Tom Moore lapping his English garden, ten times a day, raising extraordinary sums for charities, before his death from COVID.

I want to walk by faith like he did. If that means leaning on my walker to keep pace as I age, then let God's faithful work be done in me to the very end.

Like Captain Sir Tom Moore, like Abraham and Sarah, with deep intention and creativity may we each walk by faith, whether we wield it like a shield or wear it like a shoe. The particular pictures are not important. What is imperative is that we travel together, walking by faith and trusting God's promises to bless and guide us as we lament, learn, and love along the way.

For God's blessings always have been intended to flow ever outward, beyond Abraham and Sarah's family and community, to encompass generations throughout the ages. So let's keep sharing our stories of faith everywhere we find ourselves, from the internet feeds to our own backyards.

Not simply the epic narratives of Scripture, but our personal stories of God transforming our lives. Those are ones I'm hungry to overhear, everywhere they're being told. It's the eager eavesdropping I'll dare to do all day.

Amen.