

The story is told of a man who was caught in a flood. As the water rose, he was forced upward in his home, floor by floor, until he had to finally crawl up onto the roof. With no other options left, he prayed for God to deliver Him. Eventually, a raft floated toward him. The man in the raft offered to take him on board. “*No thanks,*” he said, “*I prayed for deliverance. God will save me.*” An hour later, someone else came by in a boat. They too offered to take him to safety. “*No thanks,*” he said, “*I prayed for deliverance. God will save me.*” After darkness fell, a helicopter flew overhead. Its searchlight found him sitting there on the roof.

So a ladder was lowered to him, and a friendly voice invited him to climb up. “*No thanks,*” he yelled, “*I prayed for deliverance. God will save me.*” At midnight, the water rose over the man’s roof. Moments later, he found himself standing before God in heaven. “*I prayed for deliverance!*” the man yelled at God, “*Why didn’t You save me?*” “*I tried!*” God explained, “*I sent a raft, a boat, and a helicopter! But you refused to believe that I was sending help.*”

Faith is not the mere intellectual belief that there IS a God. Nor is faith, as we just heard, the stubborn conviction that God saves us only in the ways we want Him to save us. Faith is the open ended process of trust through which we actually allow God to save us by getting into the rafts, boats, and the helicopters He sends our way - even when we do not understand how such things save us. We see this in the passage we heard from John’s gospel when Jesus said to Nicodemus “*just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.*” In making that statement, Jesus was not only saying that He was going to die on the cross, but also that anyone willing to have ‘faith’ in what He was doing on that cross would be saved from the spiritual poisons that threaten to take away eternal life and snuff out the joy of abundant life.

The incident Jesus was referencing when he spoke to Nicodemus about “*the snake in the desert*” occurred when the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness after being led out of Egypt. The books of Numbers, in recording that incident, tells us how despite all the miracles they had seen, and the many ways God had met their needs, the people were complaining that things were not to their liking, moaning in particular that there was not only a lack of food and water, but that what they did receive was horrible, saying “*we detest this miserable food.*” In response, the writer of Numbers tells us that God “*sent venomous snakes*” as punishment.

Yet even in judgement, God is merciful. Moses prayed for the people, and asked God to show mercy despite the people’s lack of faith. In response, God told Moses to fashion a snake out of bronze, set it on a pole, and tell the people that if someone were bitten to look upon the snake and they would be saved. John tells us that when Jesus spoke with a Pharisee named Nicodemus He pointed him back to that incident as he answered his questions.

That is because Nicodemus had come to Jesus to ask questions because he didn’t understand what Jesus had been saying about ‘faith.’ But after getting answers to his questions, he was even more confused. So Jesus tried one more time, explaining by through the snake incident that He had come to bring spiritual healing to people, and the key to receiving that spiritual healing was having ‘faith’ in Him.

But having 'faith,' Jesus explained (both to Nicodemus and to us), means more than merely holding the intellectual belief that there IS a God. Having 'faith' means being about a process of trust through which we allow God to infuse us with His saving love, justice, and mercy, and then work with God through the power of His grace to live in ways that look like we are being saved. Unfortunately, having THIS kind of 'faith' is not easy. For while we humans are powerful in many ways, we cannot make ourselves righteous. So try as we might, we cannot act perfectly, love completely, or understand the ways of God entirely. In fact, if we are honest we may admit that from time to time we don't even WANT to live as a person of 'faith' because doing so means we have to let go of the ways of this world, and follow the instructions of how God says we are to live, and we'd rather live in our own selfish and self-centered ways.

We see this reality in the Holy Club questions that is in our bulletin inserts this morning. In ages past, Methodist Class Leaders would ask the members of the class these questions each week. Each week, the Class Leaders would ask each person *"are you seeking to create the impression that you are better than you are? In other words, are you a hypocrite?"* They would ask *"Are you honest in all your acts and words, or do you exaggerate?"* And they would ask *"Do you pass on to others what was passed on to you in confidence?"* The class leader would also ask even more pointed questions than that, asking *"Do you pray about the money you spend?"* They would ask *"Are you jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy, or distrustful?"* And they would ask *"Do you grumble or complain?"*

When we take our confirmation class down to St. George's to learn about Methodist history, they learn that persons that did not measure up in how they responded to those questions from their Class Leader were 'blackballed.' Which means that when the rest of their class meeting voted on whether or not they got to stay in the group, at least one person would put a black marble in the box that was passed around. And that meant that they were on probation.

Those persons that continued living in 'un-faith-filled' ways, and didn't make changes to how they were living as supposed people of faith, were then expelled from the class and society. The reason they were so harsh was that those early Methodists understood that 'faith' is not merely the intellectual acknowledgment that there IS a God, but the decision to live by God's grace in the ways of God, trusting that this is the way not only to eternal life, but also to abundant life.

We see how living in a way that is not "faith-filled" is problematic in the story of Sarah. Sarah had five children. Each child could eat you out of house and home all on their own. As a result, Sarah told people that she wanted to make homemade pies for those ravenous kids because she 'believed' that homemade pies were good for hungry kids. But Sarah also 'told people that she wasn't actually making any pies for those ravenous kids because she also believed' that she needed to be baking those pies in an electric stove, and all she had was an old coal stove.

So she waited, and waited, and waited for her husband to buy her an electric stove. In fact, she waited so long that each of her children grew up, learned to drive, and started voting, before they ever ate a slice of homemade pie. In doing so, Sarah's beliefs didn't really amount to much as far

as those ravenous kids eating pies while they were growing up.

A similar thing can happen in our spiritual lives when it comes to ‘faith’ in God. For instance, God tells us in the Bible that prayer, worship, and Bible study are essential to enabling our relationship with Him to grow. As a result, if we do not make the time to do such things the faith we claim to have in God will not grow, for this is how He says it happens. Which is why the Apostle James wrote *“faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”* The same reality applies to what God says in the Bible about tithing, praying for our enemies, and loving not only Him but also our neighbor. For only ‘faith’ put into action in real and practical ways rather than just in wishful thinking, is the very PURPOSE of faith, for that is what takes us from living in ways that are selfish and self-centered to living by the very ways of God.

This is because faith is not designed to merely make us feel good about our relationship with God. Nor is it designed to merely give us confidence that God is on our side and everything will turn out good in the end. And it is not designed merely to get us to heaven. The PURPOSE of faith is to change who we are, and how we live, in there here and now of this world so we are transformed from beings who are estranged from God to being who know God, from beings that are selfish and self-centered to beings that are loving and generous, from beings that resemble the devil in how we live to beings that once again display the very image of God.

This is why John tells us in verse 18 of chapter 3 (with is just after today’s reading ends) that Jesus went on to say that *“those who do not believe are condemned already,”* for *“they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”* You can’t get any simpler than that. We may not have faith, Jesus said, because we may not have asked God to help us have faith. And we may not have asked God to help us have faith because we may not really want to ‘believe’ in the ways God lays out in the Bible. For reading our Bible, and praying, and coming to worship each week may seem to us as too simplistic of a way to let God work in our lives. And we can’t fathom how being generous, spending time in fellowship with other Christians, and reaching out to those in need in acts of service has anything to do with our soul becoming more God-like. As a result, we may possess the intellectual belief that there IS a God, but we may not believe that a major aspect of having ‘faith’ is putting our intellectual belief into action by living in certain ways.

We see the danger of not properly understanding the PURPOSE of faith in the story of a spy. He had been caught and sentenced to death. The general in charge of such executions had the custom of letting prisoners choose between a firing squad and a big black door. On the day of execution, the guards would bring the prisoner to the general. He would ask, *“what will it be, the firing squad or the big black door?”* They would almost always choose the firing squad. After yet another spy, chose the firing squad, the general turned to an aide and said, *“they prefer the known to the unknown. People fear what they do not know.”* *“What is behind the door?”* the aide asked. *“Freedom”* the general said. *“That door leads outside the compound. But I’ve only known a few men brave enough to take it.”*

The general understood that fear of the unknown keeps people paralyzed in the known realities of the present - even when the known realities of the present will lead to death. He also knew that no matter how much people would like the future to be rosier than it appears it will be, and even 'believe' that God wills it to be better, they still often cannot step out in "faith" to choose the unknown. As we move closer and closer to the end of the pandemic, and as we need to start gearing up to be the church again in the "new normal" of a post-pandemic world, there is much that is unknown to us. We don't yet know all what ministries we will be able to resume. We do not yet know all the health and safety precautions we might need to put in place again at some future date. And we don't yet know all the ways our church life might be different in this "new normal" we are entering. But there is 1 thing we do know: we know that will must allow our "faith" to lead us step by step into this new reality.

One way to do that is to attend Sunday worship services in person again. Which is why we have scheduled "Christmas in July" for next Sunday, and will name August 22nd as "The Dog Days of Summer." It is why we will be inviting you to join a fall Bible study, or Sunday School class, or participate in a special Wednesday night study in September. And it is why we already have begun inviting you to participate with us in supporting our monthly mission partners.

To move deeper into living as a person of 'faith,' I invite you to spend time in prayer this week asking God what you should do next - and then start doing it. For the PURPOSE of 'faith,' as we heard Jesus tell Nicodemus, is to do more than merely help us have the intellectual belief that there IS a God. The PURPOSE of 'faith' is to help us be about a process of trust through which we allow God to infuse us with His saving love, justice, and mercy, and to do that so fully that we not only go to heaven one day, but also work with God in the power of His grace in this present life to actually live in ways that look like we are being saved and invite others to join us on that journey.