

The Very Rev. Tracey Lind
Sunday, August 7, 2016
St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet
Genesis 5:1-6 – Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16 – Luke 12:32-40

Seeing is believing in the things you see
Loving is believing in the ones you love

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for
The conviction of things not seen

The chorus from Margie Adams' "Unicorn Song" seems to be the counterpoint to the great refrain in the Letter to the Hebrews. Yet together, they summarize the journey of faith.

Nobody's faith is perfect, and few, if any of us, are able to believe all the time. Doubt is part of human nature, and most of us want some sort of proof or evidence to undergird our beliefs.

Faith is a process, as Carter Heyward once said, "a process of leaping into the abyss not on the basis of any certainty about "where" we shall land, but rather on the belief that we "shall" land." It is a lifelong journey with ebbs and flows, mountains and valleys, high points and low moments. Our biblical ancestors, like Father Abraham, portray and affirm this reality of faithful living.

When the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," he or she is seeking to encourage our sometimes feeble but other times remarkable faith.

Human beings are not born with faith, but rather, are born with the capacity for faith. Faith often originates with an experience of God or the search for such an experience. We have an encounter with the Divine that we then try to understand; or for reasons sometimes unbeknownst even to ourselves, we go looking for such an encounter.

Did you ever feel restless, took off on a road trip, and it became a pilgrimage? Did you ever feel that your regular pattern of worship had grown stale so you decided to explore a new spiritual practice that brought you closer to God? Did you ever hit a brick wall in your love life or your career, and it became a time of spiritual growth? Or, did you ever confront the tumultuous waters of illness or death and crossed to a new place of belief and confidence in God?

As a young adult of mixed religious identity, I wrestled with God about faith so that I could proceed with integrity on what I believed was a call to ordination. In fact, one of my most memorable wrestling matches took place at St. Mary of the Harbor in Provincetown. During a Sunday service, I got so agitated with God that I walked out before communion, sat on the break wall, and screamed at the Almighty One. "Show me who you are and what you want me to believe," I shouted; but all I heard in response was the sound of wind, waves and sea gulls. Like Abraham, I wanted a sign. But unlike Abraham who received a vision of stars in the heavens, I didn't get a sign – at least not on that morning. And so, I continued to walk with God and entered seminary on faith that my way would be made clear.

And then one day it happened. I met God in a McDonald's, a story I've told in a TED Talk. Exhausted from taking on someone bigger and stronger than me, I found myself walking down 42nd Street one day in January asking God to let me go. Suddenly, a voice called out to me from within me saying, "I'm not going to let go of you." "What do you want with me?" I asked. "I want your life," the voice answered. "Why me?" I responded. "Why not?" the voice replied. At this point, I realized that something was happening and I needed to stop and pay attention to it. I went into a near-by McDonald's restaurant, ordered my usual cheeseburger-fries-and coke, and began frantically scribbling down a conversation with this voice from nowhere.

Yes, sitting in a McDonald's restaurant on 42nd Street in New York City, on January 31, 1983, I had a conversation that changed my life, once and for all. A voice that was inside of me and but outside of me – a voice that was not my own – called me by name, identified itself as God, touched my wounds, contradicted my theology, answered my questions, called me to my vocation, and reassured me when I protested.

When I pleaded for more clarity, the voice said, "I was Jesus on earth, but I'm still God, and I'm here with you now." Though I didn't comprehend it fully, it was a Trinitarian statement to which I could give my heart. When I questioned why the voice was talking with me, I heard, "Because you've been asking for it."

It was true. Like Abraham, I had been asking, begging, even challenging God to be clear with me, to help me answer my questions of faith. And here I was – on a cold January afternoon, sitting in the cathedral of fast food, having this private conversation with a voice.

At the end of our time together, I asked, "If you're inside of me, then how can you be God?" The voice replied in words I will never forget, "I'm inside of anyone and everyone who wants to know me. And, if the world would hear and follow me, my kingdom would come."

With that comment, the conversation ended. I got up and walked home in quiet amazement, wondering if I had really spoken with God.

A few days later, one of my professors, the late Dorothee Soelle, told our class that faith is a two-way street: it is both a gift from God and one's decision to accept the gift. I didn't know if I had talked with God, but I concluded that if I didn't accept the voice of God on faith, I didn't think I'll ever get a more direct message.

As I walked home from school that evening, I saw a large feather on the sidewalk. Since it was the middle of winter, I was surprised by its presence. I picked it up and put it in my backpack. Later that night, I studied the feather and decided that it was a sign from God that I was headed in the right direction.

Many years later, as I once again struggled with a major vocational decision, I went for a walk with a friend. As we walked and talked, I looked down and there were several feathers at my feet. Again, I took them as signs of God's spirit leading me. Now, every time I see a feather on the ground, I am reminded that God is with me, and these so-called 'signs' have become an integral part of my experience and faith, my seeing and believing.

I imagine that when Noah saw a rainbow, he remembered God's covenant; when Abraham looked up at the stars in the night sky, he recalled God's promise; and when Paul saw lightning on a summer afternoon, he probably remembered his encounter with the Risen Lord that brought him to his knees on the road to Damascus.

The author of Hebrews observes that most of our spiritual ancestors "died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them." Yes, they had faith, but signs from the Holy One strengthened their belief.

The gospel writers, especially John, used characters like Thomas, the woman at the well, the man born blind, Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter to illuminate the relationship between experience and faith, between seeing and believing. Who can blame Thomas for wanting evidence to help him believe in a miracle he so badly wanted? Who dare reprimand a woman for wanting clean, living water that she wouldn't have to lug home from the well day-in-and-day-out? Can we honestly fault the community of a man born blind because they didn't understand how he could now see? How can anyone discount Mary Magdalene who mistook the Risen Lord for a gardener? And who can argue with Simon Peter for wanting to see the empty tomb for himself?

God gives each of us the capacity for faith; God gives us experiences that can lead to faith; and God gives us the ability to reflect on those experiences in order to grow in faith. At the same time, God grants us the freedom to claim these experiences, dismiss them, or let them sit idle and dormant. If we make the claim, the experience can become a signpost and reminder of a sustaining belief for our faith journey. If we dismiss it, the encounter will remain simply that – an experience without deeper meaning or insight into divine reality.

As you go about your daily life this week, I invite you to ponder the signs you've been given, to ruminate on the experiences that have influenced your faith, and to recall the encounters you've had with the divine. Remember – the voice of God is inside each and every one of us – we just have to wait, watch, listen and pay attention, or as St. Luke writes: "be dressed for action [having our] lamps lit."

As you wrestle with faith in a world where the temptation of secularism lures many away from God, I pray that you may have "the assurance of things hoped for [and the] conviction of things not seen;" and that when you feel estranged and disillusioned, like a stranger in a foreign land, may you look toward heaven and count the stars or look to the ground and notice the feather, and remember that God has prepared a home for you and will lead to that place. And finally, I pray that you may have the grace, humility, and chutzpah to say as often as necessary: "God, I believe. Help my unbelief."