

*Texts: Heb. 11:1-16, 12:1-2; Luke 12:32-40*

*Subject: The Meaning of Faith*

*Theme: Word of Trust: Jesus is Faithful*

*Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; August 11, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week after worship, the family and I set out for a couple of days in Mesquite, Nevada. It was a last-week-of-summer family getaway with grandma to swim in the pool, go bowling, play games and be together. We had a great time. But it made for a short week, and by the time I was back in the office, I was catching up, making calls, visiting, meeting with our staff, and at home this weekend, we were in the process of switching kids rooms, and assembling furniture from Ikea. We had work parties, date nights, and a new school year orientation. It's been a whirlwind. The only way I get through all this is to stay in the moment. That's usually where I am - focused on the things right in front of me, and as much as I'd like to work two or three weeks ahead, I've got plenty on my plate to keep me busy.

Are you in the moment most of the time? Sometimes we can find ourselves focused on the past. We might get caught up regretting our own actions, being angry about something someone said, go around in circles over the way someone hurt us, or getting paranoid about someone's reaction to something we did. I've felt that way too.

A couple of years back, researchers from the U.K. studied 372 participants in a survey called the Temporal Focus Scale, which set out to measure where people focus, the past, present, or future. There were five groups, "those who were especially focused on the present, on the past, and on the future, as well as those who were equally focused on multiple times and those who apparently had no focus on any particular

times at all.”<sup>1</sup> They seemed to find that the group that struggled the most with anxiety and depression were in the group that focused almost exclusively on the past. Previous research on young people who struggled with low self-esteem found they were ones who seems oriented toward thinking about the past.

As we read scripture together, we hear the stories the of the past. For centuries we faithful people have shared the stories of those who have gone before us - they are the saints of the church, the ones we look to for inspiration, for insight, and for strength when we struggle. We hear today the author of Hebrews invoke some of those Bible greats. Cain and Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. They are included as examples of faithful forgoers who heard God’s promises, obeyed, and trusted in God, even though they couldn’t see the fulfillment of the promise at the time. We could add Moses to the list, who was promised a homeland, wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and then died before entering into the land. We hear these stories and don’t stay in the past, but hear how they trusted in God’s promised future. Noah was warned of a flood, and got busy building an ark - he trusted the Word. Abraham might have laughed along with Sarah when he heard that they would have offspring that outnumbered the stars, even in their old age. But they trusted God, and obeyed. Well, eventually.

Our story is the story of God, and when we hear of the past, we hear of those faithful ones who trusted in a promised future. These stories include the reality of life - struggles, pain, missteps, and frustration. They weren’t without their own failings. Yet they were faithful. They trusted in the promise given to them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Being Stuck in the Past Is Associated With Anxiety, Depression*, accessed August 10, 2019 at <https://blog.allpsych.com/being-stuck-in-the-past-is-associated-with-anxiety-depression/>

After a week where the news reports included political upheaval, gun violence, a continuing immigration crisis, and more, we can be caught in anger and despair. We can be paralyzed by fear of what's going to happen next, we can be deadlocked in arguments with people we love - along with those we only know through social media, and not know where to turn or what to do next.

It's easy to see why being stuck in the past can be depressing and cause anxiety. If we're constantly wondering where we went wrong, holding onto old hurts, or fighting against some past version of ourselves and winding around past events we can't change, we will despair. Faith frees us from the pain of the past, centers us in the good news of our Savior, and reframes the universe - toward God's promises for us in Jesus. We can trust that God is true to God's Word, because we have faith-filled examples from scripture, and most of all, through the cross of Jesus - that "high priest of the good things."

Being in the moment doesn't free us from the pressure of the problems around us. There are real issues that call for action. Our baptismal promises include the promise of forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus for us, as well as our promises to share God's story, to gather with the faithful, and to care for others, work for peace and justice in the world. Formed in worship to follow Jesus, we get reoriented to God's story each week - to see the issues and problems we face as neighbors and citizens through the lens of the cross. I cannot solve all the problems of the world. I will still make mistakes, and overlook opportunities to help. Yet, I can find peace in knowing that even though I'm not perfect - there are things I can do. There is a path for me that I can follow - there is a race set before each of us that we can run.

In 2010, as a response to an increase in suicides by lesbian gay, bisexual and trans teenagers, author and journalist Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller started posting videos online, sharing stories of hope for LGBT youth. The “It Gets Better Project”<sup>2</sup> now includes over 50,000 video entries and has been viewed over 50 million times. Dan shares a story about one young woman who came out to her parents. They were unaccepting, and told her she was wrong, sent her to therapy, and forced her to take back her admission about her sexuality. After battling with her parents, she lied to them, she told them she was just confused, and took it back. She later wrote to Dan to say that she was watching the videos, and hearing stories of those who had gone before her, and found hope again. She saw videos from queer people who were now adults, with their parents apologizing for how they had treated their children, and said she could see a future where her parents would come around to accepting her and loving her for who she was. She wrote that every day, she would come downstairs, to look at her parents, and she loved them - for who they might be in ten years. She believed it would get better.

Even when we struggle to believe that, Jesus is faithful for us. When we are stuck in the past and anxious or depressed, we can find hope again. When we can't see the road ahead, Jesus is leading. When we don't know how to move forward, we can know Jesus is going ahead of us, welcoming us into a promised future.

Jesus said “Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” The one who has gone to prepare a place for us knows the pain, anger, devastating grief, anxiety, and despair that we find ourselves in at times. Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> <https://itgetsbetter.org/>

called his disciples to follow him, to give, to share, to listen, and to serve in a world that was just as fractured as the one we find ourselves in today.

Jesus obeys the will of the Father and goes to the cross, to make a way for you and for me, to fulfill the promise of abundant life here and eternal life with him in heaven. We are formed to be faithful here in worship, through our relationships with the faithful ones who have gone before us, and as we gather with this community of faith. We can't do it alone. We learn to trust in God's promises together, and to find faith - It's not a concept - it's a way of life, to trust that Jesus means what He says. It's a way of being in a world that feels overburdened by fear, to trust that it's going to get better - not without us sharing the gifts that *we have* - and we all have something to offer. But that we are running the many and varied races that have been set before us - and we will find the hope that we long for, there at the foot of the cross, and we will know that we are not alone, as Christ is running with us, all the way.

Amen.