

“Sabbath: Finding Faith & Hope”
Hebrews 11:29-12:2 & Luke 12:49-56

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I have recently started reading more science fiction and fantasy. And I realize that it's because I am looking for ways to hold onto faith, and the hope and the call to love, that this faith demands.

It's not that I need to find faith and hope and call - to manufacture or generate these things from something that doesn't already exist. No, these things are deeply planted in you and in I by a God who is love, and a God who desires we live in ways that honor each other's God given dignity. It's rather that I am finding the need to resist and push back on the increasingly powerful ways we are being tempted to give up on the faith and the hope we have been gifted.

We are bombarded daily with images and news of a country and a world moving in ever more powerful ways towards ways of being that refuse the dignity and the worth of others, especially those who are poor or sick or displaced. We are being asked to take up understandings of the world, and how we show compassion and empathy; that want us to accept that our interests are best served by keeping others down and living in fear.

I am turning to science fiction and fantasy novels these days because there is freedom in these stories to build new worlds - worlds that are not about escapism but are designed to lift up questions around how we organize ourselves, how we live with difference, how we wield technology and our imaginations, and whether we will, in the here and, ground ourselves in honoring basic human dignity or not. Some paint wonderful pictures of worlds that are more equal, more just, and some paint terrifying prophetic pictures of just where we might be going wrong.

The book I am reading at the moment has earth facing an existential threat from the outside. The book follows the journey of those living with this threat and the many responses it brings out in people. One such response to this threat the world is facing is what the authors call the “ideology of defeatism”: that the despair and hopelessness that comes with the realization that, as things stand, they are simply not going to make it.

About half-way through the story, we read the journey of two scientists who have managed to manipulate brains. Physically manipulate neurons and synapses of

others to manufacture what they call faith. They open a “faith center” where people can come to have their faith restored. The faith that they want to restore is a certain knowledge that they will overcome. First, it is offered only to soldiers so that they will have the will to fight.

The book then cuts away from those who have received this faith noting only that they felt better, and it picks up a different strand of the story, no doubt planning to return to these faith-filled folks later. I haven’t gotten to what happens with them yet – how the author works out their story - but it does leave me with some questions about the nature of faith.

These folks in this novel need to be saved from their despair and so they allow themselves to be manipulated, allow their brains to be tricked, hoodwinked into believing and feeling something they need, something that evidence would assert is untrue and fanciful in order that they might feel better, in order that they might be able to do what they need to do, or in reality what others who have more power feel they need to do. Is this really what faith is about?

In this letter to the Hebrews, as the author encourages those who have given themselves to the way of Jesus, the author provides a long list of people who persevered with faith. Just before the author starts their list, in the chapter before the one we read today, they tell us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

All of those listed in this letter were facing some kind of hardship – some kind of affront to their own or another’s human dignity, a threat to the promise and the future that they knew God wanted for them. But in faith, they choose to act to stand strong in what they hoped for. They act on the basis of knowledge that is not manufactured out of nowhere. They act on the basis of something they know deep in their bones. A hope they are born with that they are made for a different future - a future of liberation and peace. And they trust the claim that God will be with them as they give themselves to and take a stand for that future.

Our faith, beloved is not manufactured out of nothing – it is not a trick or a manipulation. Faith is action based on that bone-deep knowledge we carry that we and all people, all creation, are made for dignity and flourishing. Knowledge that we are creatures of a creator who desires our growth, our delight, our peace.

It's grounded in a hope that is evidenced in the empathy we feel when others hurt or those twitches of pain or righteousness we feel when we experience injustice or violence towards ourselves or others. Jesus came to enliven this faith, this hope and the call to love that it engenders in us. He came to draw us back to it and he showed us what it is like to act on it in ways that bring peace.

In the gospel text today, Jesus is naming the division that his work to empower our faith will inevitably bring. But division, vitriol, and violence are not something that Jesus or God desires. If we read this text and interpret it to mean that division is the point, then we are leaving behind the rest of the story: the creation of a world that is good; the covenant that enters to form us as a God people who are a blessing, the call to the law and the prophets that demands we love of the stranger and suffering, the proclamation by the angels that Jesus' mission is peace and goodwill, the proclamation by Jesus that his mission is to release us from captivity,

What this gospel is saying today is that God knows our weaknesses, knows how we fall away from what is good and right and knows that when faith takes action there will be terrible pushback and division. Such division is a product, a terrible, fallen reaction to the call to love and it is a sign that God's spirit is on the move.

When God's spirit is on the move, people will rise to claim their dignity and the dignity of others, and others will resist that claim, we might feel the temptation to resist the claim, and we will experience division amongst and within ourselves, and we should be ready for that.

But we should be ready as Jesus is ready, ready to navigate this division as Jesus taught us: with non-violence, with gentle honesty, with compassion and sacrifice, and with strength and faith in the dignity and flourishing all creation is made for and in the God who is love and who will bring us through to the peace that we are promised.

We are almost at the end of the time we have taken this summer to consider what it means to take sabbath. We have remembered the commandment to rest and center ourselves again in who we are as God's beloved. But Sabbath is not removal from the world - a decision to let the world turn while we find our bliss separated from all the troubles out there.

Sabbath is a command to rest, to reflect, to remember, and to center ourselves in the way of the saints so that we may reenter with faith. Ready to read the signs of the time, ready to see and discern where the spirit of God is speaking to us through the voices of those whose dignity is being denied, ready to respond with discernment and care over where we are called to act, and ready to serve and stand in faith with those God calls us to even in the realities of the pushback we might receive and remembering most of all our call to honesty, gentleness and non-violence – the clear honest non-violence of Jesus - the only route to reconciliation and peace.

I am quite sure that those who had their faith manufactured in the book I am reading will not meet a happy end. Faith is not a trick, a deceit, a manipulation. It is a reaching for what we already know to be true: that God loves us and all people and that Jesus' way is the way to liberation and peace and then acting with hope on that truth wherever it may take it us. Amen.