

Being faithful is hard work. Elijah found that out when Jezebel threatened his life. He had to flee into the desert. Being faithful was hard for Elijah because it put his life in danger.

Being faithful means that we may face unexpected challenges. Mary found that out when the angel appeared to her. Being faithful was hard for Mary because she was pregnant even though she “had no husband”. She had to deal with the whispered comments, the disapproving looks, the rumors, and everything else you might imagine would go along with carrying what would have been considered an illegitimate child.

Our faithfulness is not always a guarantee that things will go smoothly. Mary and Joseph were to be Jesus' earthly parents. You might think they'd have it pretty easy. So what happened? In the ninth month of her pregnancy, Mary and Joseph have to go to Bethlehem. And for what? The best area OB/GYN? The best maternity ward? No, they go to Bethlehem to take part in a census.

They had to walk 80 miles to be part of a census. And what did they arrive to? They couldn't even get a private room, so they ended up staying in the manger, the barn. Can you picture that? Try to forget all those nativity scenes we've created with their sanitized version of the event. Try to imagine what it was really like. These animals did not clean up after themselves, and this baby did not enter into the world without shedding blood. He was wrapped in “swaddling clothes”, and it was not the latest down-filled comforter from LL Bean.

Can you imagine what they must have gone through? Do you suppose anyone besides Mary and Joseph believed this baby really came from the Holy Spirit? Being faithful is hard work. People may think you are strange to believe these wild tales, all of these things which seem impossible.

Being faithful is hard work, and it doesn't always mean that everything will go how we think it should. Mary and Joseph would probably not have chosen the path that God had in store for them. Elijah probably would not have chosen the path he was given either. Being faithful is hard work. Always has been, always will be. It requires equal doses of struggle, hope, and, well, faith. We are called to live by faith, not by provable facts. We have to say “I believe” not “I know”. We cannot prove our faith, we can only believe in it. We cannot prove that Jesus was born of a virgin, we are simply called to believe it. We cannot prove that Jesus was the Son of God, we are simply called to believe it. We cannot prove that on the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures, we are simply called to believe it.

That's not always easy. I live my life with the realization that I might be wrong. Could be. But I believe. I believe that the child born to Mary was the Son of God, I believe that He walked the earth to teach us a new way of life, to turn the world upside down and show us the life God had in mind when we were created. I believe. I believe.

Do I ever have doubts? You bet. But I don't worry about them too much. Elijah had doubts. Elijah thought that he might not make it. Elijah ran away, afraid for his life. Mary had doubts. Mary said to the angel "How can this be since I do not have a husband?" Joseph had doubts, he planned on breaking his engagement to Mary when he found out she was pregnant. And I think that even Jesus had doubts. Yes, even Jesus. Remember Jesus in the garden? "Father, if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me". Jesus had doubts, Jesus had fears. Just about everyone I have read about in the Bible had doubts at some point or another. I figure that puts me in pretty good company.

My doubts do not make God false, any more than my faith makes God true. I can doubt whether or not God exists, and God will still continue to exist. I do not create God with my faith. What difference does that make? A lot. It means that God can withstand my times of doubt.

It is hard work to be faithful, and there will be days when it is harder to believe. Do you really think that Mary went through 9 months of pregnancy without once thinking to herself "Have I lost my mind? How can I really believe that an angel appeared to me?"

Do you think that Joseph went through those nine months without even once ever doubting what he had seen, what he had been told?

What about Elijah? When he was hiding in that cave, afraid for his life, do you think he didn't wonder what he was doing with his life?

What makes it hard for you to believe? Is it because faith isn't always logical? Because it can't always be explained? Is it some doctrine, something like the virgin birth, or the resurrection? Or is it something else? Maybe it is something we all share today, a hole left in our life by Don's absence this morning. Here was a man who embodied gentleness, and love, and everything good you would hope to find in a pastor. Someone who never could have overstayed his welcome. Maybe you feel anger or disappointment that Don is no longer here in Flemington.

Or maybe it is something deeply personal: maybe God let you down. Was there a time in your life when you hoped and prayed with all your might for something to happen and it didn't? A sick friend or relative didn't get better, even though we prayed for them? A sudden, unexpected death caught you by surprise, and left you wondering "Why God? Why did you let this happen?" Pain is the biggest reason why faith is hard work, because we want --we expect -- that God will protect us from all harm. When we are hurt, we begin to wonder if God exists, or if God cares about us.

Unfortunately it isn't that easy. Being faithful is hard work, but being faithful doesn't mean that we will be protected from pain in this life. Look at the lives of those who are faithful to God. Remember Job? He was faithful, yet look at all he suffered. Look at Jesus, the only perfect Human. He was not protected from all harm.

Elijah was on the run for his life. Mary and Joseph had their lives turned upside down. They all had their moments of doubt. They were humans, just like you and me.

I'm going to say something I can't entirely prove, but something I believe. I believe that it is possible that Jesus had doubts as he lay upon the cross. Why do I say that? Because the Gospel of Matthew records this as the last sentence Jesus uttered: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

What does that sound like to you? It sounds to me like Jesus felt like God had let Him down. The words are the same as those found in Psalm 22, and that Psalm ends up being a Psalm of praise. But I don't know if Jesus was quoting that Psalm as a Psalm of praise or not. It's possible that Jesus spoke these words as his personal lament. Jesus had done all the right things, but what response did He get? Most of the people he spoke to thought He was crazy, some sort of radical. And those who did follow him during his ministry left him at the end.

So there He hung on the cross, life leaving His body, and He cried out "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?" He probably didn't have the strength to cry out, after hanging on that cross. He probably could barely whisper the words. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

But what was God's response? Did God say "Well, Jesus, I'm sorry, but because you doubted, the whole thing is called off?" NO! No! A thousand times no! Jesus lived the perfect life, only to suffer under Pontius Pilate, be crucified, dead, and buried..... but that's not the end of the story, because on the third day he rose again, in fulfillment of the Scriptures. God raised Jesus from the dead. We believe that Jesus was raised from the dead or else (as Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians) "our preaching is useless and so is your faith!" Jesus was raised from the dead. His cries were heard, our God did not abandon Jesus, and our God will not abandon us, even when we must cry out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me??" Our God calls back to us and says "I am here. I am with you. Yea though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Our God is with us. We sang this morning "O come, O come, Immanuel" and I tell you that today Immanuel has come, God is with us, and if God is with us, who can be against us? No one. Who can be against us? No one. What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing. Can the powers of this world separate us from the love of God? No. Can death separate us from the love of God? No. Can anything in our past separate us from the love of God? No. Can anything in all the world separate us from the love of God? No. Can our disbelief keep us from God? No. What? No, God will not abandon us, God will not leave us, even when we flee from God, when we try to hide away, God will keep coming with us, never let us go, whether we drive across the country, or swim across the sea, or hide in the darkest corner, God is there. Everywhere, all the time.

For you see we are His beloved Children. Even though we were sinful, He sent His son to die for us, to rob sin of its power. For sin had the power of death over us, but Jesus was raised from the dead and robbed sin of its power to separate us from God. And we who have shared in Jesus' baptism have the promise of sharing in the resurrection of the body, and life ever lasting, and that is the truth, that is the truth, that is the promise that God has made, and God always remains faithful, even when we have doubts, even when we have fears, even when it is hard to believe, God's truth remains. The tomb is empty my friends, the tomb is empty. On the third day he rose again, in fulfillment of the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead..... and His kingdom will have no end.

1 Kings 19 -- adaptation for 3 readers

Narrator: Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done including how he had executed all the prophets [of Baal].

Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah.

Jezebel: She said “May the gods strike me dead if by this time tomorrow I don't take your life the way you took the lives of Baal's prophets.

Narrator: Frightened, Elijah fled to save his life.
He came to Beersheba in Judah and left his servant there.
Then he traveled through the wilderness for a day.
He sat down under a broom plant and wanted to die

Elijah: “I've had enough now, Lord. Take my life!
I'm no better than my ancestors.”

Narrator: Then he lay down and slept under the broom plant.

An angel touched him and said “Get up and eat”

When he looked he saw (near his head) some bread baked on hot stones and a jar of water. So he ate, drank, and went to sleep again.

The angel of the Lord came back and woke him up again

Angel: “Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you”

Narrator: He got up, ate, and drank. Strengthened by that food,
he traveled for 40 days and nights until he came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

There he went into a cave and spent the night.

Then the Lord spoke his word to Elijah.

God: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah: “Lord God Almighty, I have eagerly served you.
The Israelites have abandoned your promises
torn down your altars, and executed your prophets.

I am the only one left, and they're trying to take my life.

God: “Go out and stand in front of the Lord on the mountain”

Narrator: As the Lord was passing by, a fierce wind tore mountains, and shattered rocks ahead
of the Lord.

But the Lord was not in the wind.
After the wind came an earthquake
But the Lord was not in the earthquake.
After the earthquake there was a fire.
But the Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire there was a quiet, whispering voice.

When Elijah heard it,
he wrapped his face in his coat,
went out, and stood at the entrance of the cave.

The voice said to him

God: “What are you doing here Elijah?”

Elijah: “Lord God Almighty, I have eagerly served you.
The Israelites have abandoned your promises
torn down your altars, and executed your prophets.

I am the only one left, and they're trying to take my life.

God: “Go back to the wilderness near Damascus
same way you came.

I still have 7,000 people in Israel
whose knees have not knelt to worship Baal
and whose mouths have not kissed him.

Here ends this morning's Old Testament lesson