

## The Rev. Emily Dunevant

August 10, 2019

Community Prayer Service

Hebrews 11:1-3,8

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“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Those may be some of the most beautiful words in scripture. Or, depending on your perspective, they may be the most frightening. I have found over the years, that what I understand as faith often begins with a question, a dilemma, a crossroads. Those moments when life brings you to a place of transition where maybe you have to let go of old habits or accept a new set of circumstances. When you can't know the end result and have to trust that you are capable of taking that next step. It's those moments when you put your life in God's hands. And, we hope for the things not seen.

For some of us, the hopefulness will be exhilarating...because we feel a conviction that God is guiding our choices, bringing us to a place of fulfillment and meaning. For others, that hopefulness may feel more like doubt or sheer terror at the unknown things to come and we wonder if our prayers are heard and if they will be answered and how they will be answered. Not seeing can be deeply unsettling. It pushes us to our limit of this thing called faith.

Yet, maybe faith is what happens in those moments when we do doubt, when we find our selves struggling with uncertainty. Maybe faith happens when we let go of needing to control our situation and finally, humbly, put everything in God's hands. And then, we simply say...God I believe you have a plan for me. I'm really scared but I am going to open my heart to the future only you can see right now. That's when faith begins to flourish.

Debbie Thomas, one of my favorite writers says, “Faith is the audacity to undertake a perilous journey simply because God asks us to — not because we know ahead of time where we're going.”

I love to tell the story of when I went to seminary. I applied to only one school...Union Theological Seminary in New York City. I had a nagging in my heart for years that God was calling me to a greater place of service but the timing was never right. I kept turning away. I had kids to raise, meals to cook, a household to contribute to. Worse than my responsibilities at home was the fact that I had absolutely no clue what I was going to do with a seminary degree. It seemed crazy. Yet, the nagging kept at me. It was weird.

And so, I prayed. I felt convicted of two things. First, I didn't want to be a preacher. The second was that God wouldn't let it go. He's can be so insistent at times. So I said, OK God. I will put in my application to seminary but I am going to apply to only one school. God, I don't know what you want from me but I will take this first step. If I don't get accepted well, then, that's that. Done and done. It was almost a challenge from me to God.

I have never forgotten the day my acceptance letter arrived. I gulped, took a deep breath, and said out loud...here we go.

I had no one to guide me on this journey. No church behind me. Just me and God. It was exactly how I wanted it. It was both an incredibly wonderful experience and an incredibly terrifying one. The fear of not knowing what God was doing in my life was at times overwhelming. For three years, I studied. I read. I wrote. I waited. It was hard.

I will tell you this...my faith only got stronger as I lived into those overwhelming moments of unknowing. Each time I wanted to walk away from it all, when I was exhausted and burnt out, someone would step into my life and redirect me. When I didn't feel I was smart enough or patient enough or good enough, someone would remind me that God had a purpose for my life.

At graduation, the president of our seminary tried to make a joke that was not well received on my ears. She said she was proud of us for taking this step of going to seminary but the harsh reality was that most of us would not get jobs doing what we had hoped. And in that moment I thought...God...had I made a mistake? What had I been thinking? How could I have been so bold as to believe God was calling me?

I graduated on a Friday and had a job offer on Tuesday in the Chaplaincy at the University of Richmond. I had never anticipated the outcome. I could not have planned it if I had tried. It was the perfect place at just the right time. I finally understood God's plan for me.

I often laugh at the audacity of going to seminary with no plan and no guidance...except of course the guidance I received from my faith. It seemed crazy at the time but it also seemed perfectly reasonable.

Faith works that way if we let it. Crazy and reasonable all at the same time. Helping us to take the steps we couldn't take on our own so that we may live into the beautiful plan that God has created for each of us. Nothing is more reassuring. Thanks be to God.