

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 1:18-25

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

December 29, 2019

The First Sunday after Christmas

This is typically a Sunday I take off. Because as any priest will tell you – our brains are pretty much fried after all of the planning and teaching and preaching that mark the Advent season. We pour our hearts into each and every detail so that hopefully the folks who come through our doors will experience a moment of joy and peace. And so, we stay up late, wake up early, pray we don't forget something important and cross our fingers that everything comes off without a hitch.

By the end of Christmas Eve my voice was almost gone, my feet hurt, and it took all of my effort to crawl into bed that night. But, I decided to not take this Sunday off. And, last night as I was trying to finish my sermon...I thought that might have been a bad decision. My brain still wasn't quite back into the swing of things.

However, in my brain stupor, I kept coming back to one simple question...after all of the preparation, after all of the preaching and the anticipation and the celebration, does faith really matter? Does it matter to you the day after Christmas when the tree comes down and you have to go back to work?

Does faith matter?

Maybe you think that is a silly question. But think about it...when life gets busy, when we are pulled in different directions, where do we prioritize our faith? When we are tired, run down and stressed out...do we fall back on our faith to help lift us up or does it feel like one more obligation to check off our already packed to-do list?

With that being said, as we enter the new year, I don't want you to make a New Year's resolution to come to church more frequently (although that would be great). What I do want you to do is take time to reflect on why faith matters to you. And, likewise, reflect on the times when you have allowed faith to be placed on the back burner. You know those days when faith just seems like a lot of work and so you tell yourself you will get around to it another day, when you have more time, more trust, or more hope in the power and love of God.

But, I am here to tell you, there is big difference in saying we have faith and truly relying on our faith. Saying you have faith is like making a claim that others can understand. They can identify you in a category that makes sense. Growing up in South Carolina, often the first question you would get is, "Where do you go to church?" Who you were was defined by what faith you claimed. We were safely in the "right" category if we claimed a faith and a church to belong to.

But, that question didn't get at the heart of the matter...where do you go to church was simply a location. Maybe we should have been asking, do you truly rely on your faith? Do you make it a priority?

It is easy to say how we identify as people of faith but it can be much harder to quantify that claim. Because living into a Christian identity is risky. It takes commitment and it takes time. It takes our willingness to say this matters to me and it makes a difference in my life and I am going to commit to learning and growing into my faith as much as I can, not some other day, but today. This is my priority.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *Mere Christianity*:

"To trust Jesus means, of course, trying to do all that He says....Thus if you have really handed yourself over to Him, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get to Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you."

We live into our faith, we participate actively in our faith because a gleam of heaven is already in us. And when we start to actively bring faith to the forefront of our lives we quickly realize we can't live without it.

I read somewhere that faith isn't a listing of facts. It isn't a check list of how good we are or how many nice things we did for someone else or even where we go to church. Faith is the orientation of our soul. I think that is what C.S. Lewis was getting at when he said that we don't do things in order to be saved, God has already begun to save us. And out of that saving grace we can nothing less than live fully into a life of active, committed faith.

Why does faith matter?

Faith matters because it strengthens our commitments to one another and reminds us of God's commitment to us. Because there will be times, no matter how hard we try when we simply can't do everything on our own. We will feel helpless, we will feel hurt, we will feel overwhelmed. We will struggle to make sense of our lives.

When you are at someone's hospital bed.

When you have lost a job and are unsure how to provide for your family.

When you are in conflict with a loved one and are seeking to do the right thing.

When you are unsure of your purpose and want to find out how you fit in to this world.

Faith matters. So we lay our lives at the Jesus' feet and we say help me Lord. I need you.

Faith matters because there will be moments of joy and grace so overwhelming that the only thing we can do is fall onto our knees and thank God for His incredible blessings.

When a child is born and new life is breathed onto this earth.
When a loved one is healed from a sickness after countless prayers.
When a community comes together to help a family in need.

Faith matters. So we rejoice in God's gifts of grace and mercy. Thank you, Lord.

Faith matters because we know in our times of joy and sadness, in times of gratitude and in times of pain, that God is lifting us up to love and to be loved.

As you begin this new year, my prayer for you is that you will remember why faith matters in your life. Let the light of Christ shine forth in you. Amen.