

**“Blind Faith”**

**Luke 7:1-10; I Kings 18**

**May 29, 2016**

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**Believing that God is utterly faithful, that God loves us no matter what, and that there is nothing that can separate us from that love, is a conviction you choose to believe.**

Do you believe in God? That's a silly question, right? I mean, you wouldn't be here if you didn't believe in God. Or would you? Some of you just answered, “Of course I do.” But maybe others of you said, “I don't know.” Still more of you said to yourselves, “Some days yes, some days no.” I hope that you do. I hope that your presence here says something about your belief or at least that you want to believe. Do you believe in God? Those of you who said “yes,” or even “I don't know,” think about that for a moment, would you? // Why do you believe in God? Why do you believe? Before we go any further, I guess we should say what we mean by “believe.” When we talk in the church about belief or about faith, we are not talking about believing as an intellectual exercise. I believe that two plus two equals four. I believe that Paris is the capital of France even though I've never been there. I believe that the closest star to our solar system is Proxima Centauri which is a little more than 4 light-years away. And I believe that's a really long way. And on most days, none of those things make a big difference in my life. When we talk about belief in the church, we are talking about things that make a big difference. In a way we are talking about trust. When we speak of believing in Jesus, we are not talking about believing certain facts about him, “such as that he was born of a virgin and raised Lazarus from the dead. Instead, it is a matter of giving our hearts to him, of come hell or high water putting our money on him, the way a child believes in a mother or a father, the way a mother or a father believes in a child.”<sup>1</sup>

The story we read this morning from the Book of the Kings is a famous one about the prophet Elijah. During the time of Elijah, which is about the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the nation of Israel has been divided. Several generations before Elijah, the great and powerful King Solomon had lead Israel to its zenith of

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1 Buechner, Frederick.

power, wealth and influence. Jerusalem was a glorious capital and the Temple of Solomon may have been one of the great wonders of the ancient world. But all of that did not come without cost.

Solomon was only the third king of Israel and the nation was still a fairly loose confederation of twelve tribes. But to gain all of this wealth and power, the burden of taxes was heavy on the people. So when Solomon died, representatives from the tribes went to visit his son, the new king Rehoboam. Naturally they asked him if he would lighten up on them now that his father was gone. But Rehoboam, thinking that presenting a tough-guy image to the people would be a good thing, said, “if you thought my father was a hard man, you haven't seen anything yet!” And so the ten tribes that made up the northern part of the kingdom immediately rebelled against the idea of higher taxes and went and formed their own nation and chose a new king. So the nation of Israel splits into two parts, the northern kingdom, still called Israel and the southern kingdom, still with Jerusalem as capital, called Judah after the largest and most powerful of the twelve tribes, the tribe of David and Solomon. So you see, revolt over taxes have been happening for at least 3000 years. There's nothing new under the sun.

By the time Elijah comes around, a king named Ahab is the ruler over the northern kingdom of Israel, and he finds a wife named Jezebel who was a princess of Sidon, who was not Jewish, and who tried to talk her husband into giving up the worship of God and instead to worship Baal who was the god of her homeland. Baal was traditionally the storm god, the one who brought rain for the fields, and was associated with thunder and lightning and high mountains. So a contest on the mountain to bring fire from heaven was one at which Baal should have excelled. Or one would think. But as the story tells us there is no response from Baal and the God of Elijah, the God of Israel wins the contest. Is that what this story is supposed to teach us? That our God beats all other gods? That we should have contests between religions and see who wins? That the losers get put to death, which is what happens to the 450 priests of Baal? Is that what this story teaches us?

To answer that question, we need to look not just at the story of Elijah, but at the time when this story was written. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are parts of a large history of Israel and

Judah that wasn't recorded until hundreds of years after the event took place. In fact by the time this story was written down, the nation of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians. There was no longer any northern kingdom for Elijah or any prophet to be concerned about. The southern kingdom of Judah was also conquered by the Babylonian armies and its people taken into exile in Babylon and the final editing of this book probably took place while the people were in exile. So what does this story have to say to a people whose nation has been defeated, whose capital of Jerusalem has been destroyed, whose famous Temple of Solomon has been burned to the ground, and whose God is nowhere to be found? It seems to me that the story tells them to have faith. It tells them that the God who defeated Baal is the same God who is hard to find now. It tells us that faith is not based on only the events in our lives, it is not just based on what we see.

I asked you before, why is it that you believe in God. Why would you put your trust in God? Do you put your faith in God because that's what your parents did before you, it's sort of like a family tradition? Well, what happens when your parents pass away? What happens when you watch your father or mother die a difficult death, long before you are ready for them to go? Do you still trust in God then? Or maybe you trust in God because he takes care of you. You trust in God because he causes good things to happen to you. Many of the people followed Jesus because of what he could do for them, he could feed them or heal their diseases, he could fix their problems. Is that why we trust God, because he makes life easy? What happens when life doesn't come so easily? What happens when divorce or bankruptcy or illness happens? What happens when the things you hoped for don't come about? Do you still believe in God then? Do you believe in God because of what you see? Or in spite of what you see? Is your faith blind because you believe no matter what? Sometimes we talk about blind faith as if it is a bad thing, but maybe in the end, all faith is blind. If we saw, we would know. Trust is something different than knowing. Are we able to trust, to believe, when our sight might tell us something different?

That's what the people of Israel had to answer when they were in captivity in Babylon. Do we still trust

in God even though times are hard and this is not what we expected to happen? When they heard the story of Elijah it was a story that was supposed to tell them that God was the only God and that if they were not seeing him right now, God was still God and to still trust in him. That's why Jesus is so amazed by the faith of the centurion. Here's someone who is not supposed to believe in God the way the Jews do, but this man has faith. His faith is so strong that he doesn't need to see Jesus, he just trusts that Jesus can do what he says he can do—he doesn't need to see him do it.

That's faith. The scholar Alan Brehm says: “It seems to me that is what genuine faith is like. It’s a decision you make, no matter what the circumstances of your life. Believing that God is utterly faithful, that God loves us no matter what, and that there is nothing that can separate us from that love, is a conviction you choose to believe. And it makes all the difference in the way you see the world around you. I don’t think this kind of faith ignores tragedy in the world. It is simply too much a part of the reality of our lives to ignore. But this kind of faith also does not surrender to the tragedy in the world. Without needing any kind of supernatural intervention, without looking for “signs and wonders,” this kind of faith believes that God is always working in our lives for his good purposes, to bring peace, and wholeness, and joy, and life to all of us. And when we believe in God in that way—with all our hearts—we can see the goodness and beauty and joy in the world, despite the tragedy and suffering.”<sup>2</sup>

Why do we believe? Not why do we believe there is a God, but why do we trust in Jesus Christ and through him believe in God and put our lives in his hands? Why? For me it is because of Jesus Christ. Yes because of my experience with him but also because of the experience of countless others and the promises and hope that he provides. I believe that we can entrust our lives to him. I want to believe that he is Lord of this church and of his church, wherever it is, and that in his name we are freed to love one another and empowere to share that love with a hurting world. I believe that his is Emmanuel, God with us. God with us all. God in us all. I believe that. I trust that. I trust God.

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2 Brehm, Alan