

“Pillars of Faith”

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Preacher

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From the Pulpit

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It's our tradition at First Church that a confirmand delivers the confirmation Sunday sermon. I'm speaking today because Mala and Erin asked if I would. If you'd like to set the stopwatch function on your phones, we'll see how long it takes to make them regret it.

In our reading today, the apostles ask Jesus when they'll see Jerusalem liberated. He tells them, “It is not for you to know.” Even those closest to Jesus are still told, “Trust me.” “Have faith.” Faith is hard because faith is not certainty. It's especially hard when you're fourteen. Developmental psychologists say in early adolescence, you start to think for yourself. You notice parents can be wrong, and that they don't always do as they say their children should. This new cognitive capacity – to question and analyze – can be destabilizing. Here, you might ask questions like, “Is everyone at coffee hour actually this friendly and polite? Or are they just on their best behavior because they're at church?” It's not for us to know. At school, you might ask, “Are they really my friends, or do they secretly laugh at me?” It's not for us to know. By yourself, you might ask, “Am I normal? Am I in the normal range for normal?” At age fourteen, it's not for you to know.

At fourteen, you start to ask questions like, “If God didn't make the sun until the third day, how did he know the first two days had gone by?” Or, “If Cain was sent into the land east of Eden, where did he, the son of Adam and Eve, find a wife?” Or, “If God can do anything, can he make a rock so big he can't pick it up?” The questions aren't always trivia or word games. I want to single out Mala. She is the first confirmand in many years with the guts to ask, “Why does God allow oppression?” These questions have answers, but they take a lot of study and reflection to find. They still don't offer certainty.

It would have been so much easier in the days of Exodus. Every day, an Israelite fourteen-year old would have seen God's pillar of cloud. Every night they would have seen His pillar of fire. They'd have that certainty of God's

love, his presence – at a minimum, his existence. But even in Exodus, we read the Israelites lost their faith in a God they could not see, and they made a golden calf.

This struggle for certainty is not limited to theology. When Lily Tomlin said, “Reality is a collective hunch,” we all laughed. She was closer to the truth than we realized. In physics, as they study the fundamental make-up of everything, they can’t test their hypotheses because the subjects are particles much smaller than atoms. At the extremes of mathematics, the numbers add up but we can’t say if they apply to anything in the reality we know or not. When someone recovers from cancer, we say, “They’re better now.” We all know, “They’re better now,” is really short-hand for, “They have a such-and-such-percent chance of surviving the next five years.”

I should apologize to everyone here with anxiety. When you pile one uncertainty upon another, it becomes terrifying. It’s too much to think about. It’s too easy to wave it away with denial, or the kind of blind faith that really isn’t faith at all – just mindless repetition of what we know we’re supposed to say. When we try to reach certainty on any subject, it’s like that pillar of cloud. You see it clearly from a distance. It leads you in the right direction. But as you come close to the center, everything becomes misty and unclear. The harder we try to grab hold of it, the more it slips out of our grasp. If grown-ups in your life have let you down, you can be left asking, “Why should I believe any of this?”

Let’s remember, our brains do not only think. They also feel. When you tell someone else how you feel, they’ll sometimes say, “That’s not logical.” Technically, that might be true. But to say our feelings are not logical is like saying algebra is not geometry. Our logic and our instincts – our emotions and our intuition – are two different tools He has given us for two different jobs. We’ve all had gut senses that we could not justify or ignore.

Every year, the Goodyear Tire company gets complaints from ranchers. As the blimp travels from one stadium to another, it flies over grazing lands. If it’s a sunny day, the blimp’s shadow may pass over a herd. As the cattle

are overshadowed, they are moved to awe and wonderment. Their instincts catch fire, and they stampede. Airships, advertising, major league football, vulcanized rubber? They're all beyond a cow's cognitive capacity. It's not just that they don't know what a blimp is. They can't.

This is what it is like for us in those rare, quiet moments of faith. The one day where you're struck by the light streaming in through the stained glass. Or the way the gospel reading aligns with the worries on your mind. The still place your mind settles in when you reverently walk the labyrinth downstairs. These brief moments where we forget ourselves let us know we are connected. We are a branch on a tree of faith rooted in the earliest of Biblical times, and an irreplaceable cog in the machinery of God's creation. Just like a cow seeing the shadow of a blimp, we feel the presence of God as if a pillar of fire was lighting us up from inside.

We don't talk about those times much. They don't happen that often. They're hard to put into words without slipping into hyperbole – the way I just did. I wonder if Jesus told his apostles, “It is not for you to know,” because with limited human minds, they could not comprehend what redemption of Jerusalem would even mean. Maybe these moments of mindful presence are the closest we can come to understanding. They do not bring us certainty rooted in facts, but they keep faith shining when all the evidence would tell us to despair.

It's not every day a blimp passes overhead. There's a reason every major religion has a tradition of contemplative practice. Faith is both a gift and something that needs nurturing. Psalm 46:10 instructs us, “Be still and know that I am God.” Being still inside and out is easier said than done. Reading the Bible slowly and prayerfully can help you uncover meaning you did not feel before. Just saying the Lord's prayer to yourself, on repeat, until they stop being meaningful words, can help ignite that pillar of fire. The Irish missionary nun, Mother Mary Evangelista said, “If you empty yourself of yourself, you will find God.” I have faith God will fill you up with God.

Years ago, on a spring day in upstate New York, I went for a walk alone. The weather was beautiful but I couldn't enjoy it, because I was chewing over questions of faith. I wanted it, didn't have it, couldn't find a logical reason to accept it. I thought to myself, "If there is a God, why doesn't He send me a sign?" A flock of crows rose up from the trees, and they flew across the Hudson River. Was this a sign? Or just a coincidence? It's not for me to know. But I keep faith.

Mala, Erin, I hope both of you will keep asking questions as you go forward. I hope you'll seek out that silence, those moments of connection that light us up like a pillar of fire. I hope you'll continue to watch for the pillar of cloud that leads us on in faith, even if certainty stays out of reach.

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