

The scriptures today call us to task as God's people. Isaiah shared a love poem, expressing God's disappointment with the vineyard God had so faithfully tended over the years...God's people had turned their backs on God, producing bad fruit just where God had hoped for justice and integrity and faith from them.... Then, in the letter to the Hebrews, the early Christians were encouraged to remember the heroes of the faith, those who - in spite of hardships and failures - were able to hold on to their faith in God and thus to let God work through them... This was and continues to be important for Christians to hear, for it would challenge us to "keep the faith," to set our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our call.... When we "keep the faith," we are able to endure whatever happens to us in life, and we are able to yield the fruits God wants to see in us: love, hope, peace, patience, kindness, goodness.... (see Galatians 5:22)

This weekend there has been a national gymnastics championship in Hartford; the women's finals were broadcast last night on Channel 4. I watched as the young women did incredible movements on the balance beam, power-packed floor routines, as they propelled themselves on the vault, and as they showed their strength on the uneven parallel bars. It struck me, as some would step out of bounds or lose balance or miss a connection, how focused those athletes have to be. If they mess up in their routine, they keep going. They keep their eyes on the next step, on their goals. They listen to their coaches. They focus on their goals.

The Bible would have us realize that something much more important than winning athletic competitions is offered to us by God. Throughout our lives, God has been pruning us, tending us, speaking to our hearts, and yearning for us to learn to love God and to be obedient to God's ways.... Jesus made it clear what God wants from us: "Love the Lord your God with all you are; and love your neighbor as much as you do yourself."... Hebrews coaches, "Keep your eyes on Jesus; look to him as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

The writer to the Hebrews was speaking to folks in the early church who were losing hope and focus. They were finding ways to disagree with each other; some fell away because of persecution, families were split apart because of their belief or lack thereof in Jesus as Messiah, and a lot of folks just didn't seem to have much commitment any longer.... There were all sorts of ways the people's eyes moved away from Jesus to other things in life, and their faith wavered.... So the writer called the people back to focus, back into training, back into fruitful living.

As we heard the reading from the letter to the Hebrews, did you notice some of the folks who were lifted up as examples of strong faith in God? I did, and discovered good reason to hope in that roster! Some of those "faith heroes" were anything *but* super-heroes when it came to their faith. Case in point: Gideon! You can read about Gideon in the 6th chapter of the book of Judges, in the OT. Gideon was a very fearful man, hiding out from the threatening Midianites when the Lord appeared to him. Gideon asked for a sign that it was really God... Gideon also asked why, if God really was with them, were the people having such a terrible time with the Midianites threatening to wipe them out. Later, just before Gideon went to fight against the Midianites, he asked God for yet MORE proof. Here is how the Bible describes one of Gideon's requests for proof. Listen:

Then Gideon said to God, "In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, 37 I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said." 38 And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. 39 Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew." 40 And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

God had to pretty much hold Gideon's "faith hand" all the way through, but God did bring forth victory through Gideon. God can do big things through weak people! Throughout the centuries and seasons, God has put up with real human beings who have often faltered, but finally managed to be faithful, usually through God's persistent grace. King David was pretty good at trusting God, but there were times when he did truly horrible things, even having a good man murdered after David had committed adultery with his wife and made her pregnant. God brought forth much good fruit in spite of David's shortcomings, though.

There's one woman in the reading from today who had deep and surprising faith: Rahab. She was not a Jewish woman, but she told the Jewish spies who were checking things out before the army of Israel started to enter the land God had promised to give them that she believed that their God, the God of Israel, was giving the land over to the Hebrew people. Rahab also risked her own life to keep those Jewish men from being caught... When God's own people were unable to believe that God would help them take the land, this foreign woman, often called a prostitute, proclaimed to them that God would prevail. Her faith made it possible for them to believe. (See Joshua 2)

What about our faith today? It's easy to move through life with our eyes pretty much anywhere *but* on Jesus.... We're good with some kinds of faith: we have faith that we will have light when we flip on the light switch; and that a touch of the remote control will wake up our televisions. If we dial 911, help will probably come. We live lives trusting everything from traffic lights to the water company. But what happens when we get sick or lose someone we love? What does our faith do when the "bad guy" seems to win and life seems to kick us more times than we can pull ourselves up? What happens to our faith when our children turn their backs on us or we find ourselves caught in some sort of self-defeating spiral? As you heard last week, from Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." God invites us to live lives where faith is the result of keeping our eyes on Jesus, of trusting that there is a larger horizon than we ourselves can grasp. ...

Here is a story intended to help us see the kind of horizon God wants us to risk seeing. By just about anybody's standards, Joe was a "good catch" for a girl. He was upright, he was kind, had a good sense of humor, he was physically attractive, he was intelligent, and he was wealthy! Joe had been raised by his aunt, who had been a nun, so he was brought up to know what was right, and what was wrong. He had a good mind and was a hard worker, so he had no trouble making it through veterinary medical school and setting up a healthy practice. He had compassion, treated his patients and their owners fairly, and he faithfully attended church. A good catch.

At church he met Michelle. Michelle was lovely, and she quickly set her cap (so to speak) for Joe. She attended the Bible studies he did, she helped out at the fund-raisers when he did, and she gave him the extra attention that made him feel special. In a matter of time, what seemed to be an ideal marriage was formed. Joe anticipated a relationship of trust and mutual growth with his beautiful bride.

Michelle had a lot going for her. She had made a smart choice in her marriage, for Joe was a very good husband. But Michelle could not handle her own restlessness. She quickly found herself bored with a predictable life. She complained to her husband that she didn't enjoy being a housewife, so they agreed that she would find a job. She began working for an investment company. Four years later, Michelle was pregnant with their first child. During the months of her pregnancy, some terrible truths came out. First, Michelle had the AIDS virus, which she had contracted during one of several extra-marital affairs she'd been having. Second, Michelle had - without her husband's knowledge - invested huge amounts of his money in real estate deals that had turned sour. Third, Michelle had embezzled money from her employer in order to try to cover gambling losses she had incurred, again without any knowledge on the part of Joe.

Joe was devastated. His wife was indicted on the embezzlement charge. Her defense required much of what he had left over from her bad investments. The baby born to them tested positive for the AIDS virus. And Michelle refused to communicate to him about her affairs or about the way she had cheated him.

Joe's church tried to support him as best they could. Many of his friends advised him to dump Michelle altogether, to divorce her while she spent her time in jail and let an agency take care of the baby. Joe was deeply grieved, but he could not turn his back on Michelle. He hired a nurse to help him care for the child, and he went to see his wife at the jail once a week. For weeks, she refused to speak to him. Finally, they began to communicate. Michelle asked Joe, "Why do you come? Why haven't you washed your hands of me, after what I've done to you?" Joe had only one answer: "Because I love you, and I still hope that we can build a life together." (Source unknown)

Terrible story! Does Joe really hope that Michelle will ever be trustworthy??

This is a story of what God is still saying to us, God's people. God brought forth a vineyard, the people of Israel, and provided for them a place to dwell and a dependable relationship with God. "I will be your God; you will be my people." God even became flesh in Jesus and gave himself up for the sake of his people, to save us from our sins and self-destructive addictions. But the people turned their backs on God and lost sight of what was important to God. They did not care for the weak and poor. They did not love their neighbors. They often did not even bother to give God even an hour of worship on a Sunday morning....They lost their identity and they became unable to produce the fruit God so longed to bring forth through them... THEY are us.

Fortunately for us, the same kind of love Joe had for Michelle is apparently in the character of God Almighty. From human perspective, common sense would tell the Lord of Creation: "Enough, already! Get rid of these faithless people. They don't serve you. They don't even acknowledge your

existence until they get into some sort of trouble. Don't demean yourself by allowing these harlots to continue pretending to be followers of Jesus when they don't even want to meet him halfway!"

But God chooses not to be bound by human perspective. God continues to hope that we will respond.

Throughout the centuries, the prophets of God have called God's people to task in the face of lack of faithfulness as God's people. But the prophets have also spoken words of hope: God is the God of steadfast love, absurd mercy. God may punish God's people, pruning us as one prunes a valued shrub or vineyard, but God still has great hope that someday we will respond and let God build a life with us together.

The world rages around us... Storms, wars, fires, floods, crime, drunk driving, corruption, political messes, violence all around, cruelty. It's easy to be overwhelmed and to look everywhere but where God has asked us to look: fix your eyes on Jesus. Which brings to mind an illustration about cable cars, like those in San Francisco.

You've seen those cable cars going up and down the treacherous hills of SF; perhaps you've ridden them. But did you know that the cars don't have any power of their own? They have no motors. They move ONLY as they grip the cable that runs up and down the streets.

We find true life and direction and are able to produce good fruit even in rough and scary times ONLY as we let our faith grip and keep our eyes on Jesus. He is our power, he is the One we are to imitate when there seems no good reason to forgive or help someone; he is our hope.

Whenever you see an athlete or watch a game, marvel at those who have trained for endurance and great yields... And pray that God will also be able to marvel at the way you will keep your eyes on Jesus. If we do this, our lives will yield fruit for the Lord, and we will live in close relationship with God, filled with blessing beyond what we can imagine. Thank God! Amen.