

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

NOT A WISH, BUT A PROMISE

Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16

Luke 12:32-40

When you are faced with a crisis, who would you rather have to depend upon, a singing cricket or the living God?

In the movie, *Pinocchio*, Jiminy Cricket sang what became Disney's signature song, *When You Wish Upon a Star*.

*When you wish upon a star
Makes no difference who you are
Anything your heart desires
Will come to you*

*If your heart is in your dream
No request is too extreme
When you wish upon a star
As dreamers do*

*Fate is kind
She brings to those who love
The sweet fulfillment of
Their secret longing*

*Like a bolt out of the blue
Fate steps in and sees you through
When you wish upon a star
Your dreams come true*

Yes, wishes are the raw material for dreams. But in the down-and-dirty world of cancer, divorce, war, unemployment and evil, dreams are as ephemeral as the morning dew. For the high school soccer player who has a dream of playing in the World Cup, planting his foot wrong and blowing out his knee will in an instant kill that dream, and no amount of wishing it otherwise will revive it.

In the great chapter on faith from the Letter to the Hebrews, we see nothing about wishes. Rather, underlying the entire passage is concept of promise.

¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible...

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. (Hebrews 11:1-3,8-11)

The Patriarchs were men who did not spend their days in wishful thinking, but in following the One who had made them a promise.

According to Webster's Dictionary, a *wish* is a want, desire or goal, while a *promise* is a declaration that gives the person to whom it is made a right to expect or to claim the performance or forbearance of a specified act. We may wish that things were different than they are in reality, but that does not change the reality. At best, wishes can only change one's state of mind. When someone is breaking into your house, wishing it were not so, what we call denial, may be a good mental health defense, but it will not keep the intruder out of your bedroom. In a crisis, wishing is merely refusing to acknowledge reality.

In contrast, relying on a promise is a declaration that the present reality will be changed by the reality of what is promised. Back to our burglar – let's say that your burley, ex-marine, weight-lifting, gun-toting, undercover drug agent neighbor has given you a button and promised that if you ever get scared just push the button and he will be over in a minute to take care of the problem. When the robber breaks in, would you wish it otherwise or press the button about a hundred times? Believing and acting on a promise is what we call faith. It is living as if that which was promised has already come to be. It is investing in a future reality. Faith is always based on a promise, whether it is implied as in a bridge or an airplane or explicit as in the Bible.

Jesus was talking about investing in the future reality, that which has been promised when he said:

³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Luke 12:32-34)

Although Jesus is using the metaphor of money, he does so only because that is what we value most. The true and lasting treasure is Jesus himself. He is the Reality by which all other realities must be measured. Therefore, as members of his Body, the Church, we must “*Be dressed for action and have [our] lamps lit.*” In short, like those waiting for their absent master, we need to live our lives with the promise of God informing everything we do and every reaction we make. It is our faith, our belief in Jesus that will be reckoned to us as righteousness.

So, what does that look like in our down-and-dirty world? Of course it looks like the lives of Abraham and the Patriarchs, as well as the Apostles and heroes of the Christian faith. But today, in 21st Century United States, how do we enter into this faithful living? It is a God-centered, Church-focused response to all that we experience. God has expressed his promises and chosen the Church as the vehicle of their dissemination and execution. Through the Church we learn of God's promises and we are encouraged by the repetition of those promises. But it is also in the Church community where the temporal manifestation of those promises is meant to be executed. In the crucible of affliction, we are to call upon our brothers and sisters in the Church, not only to remind us of the promises of God, but also to walk through the furnace with us as the tangible presence of God. And as we walk together, we point to Jesus and the promised reality that will ultimately and eternally eclipse our present struggles. For that reality has already been established. The cross and empty grave stand as witnesses to the reality that sin, death and the devil have already been defeated by the One who is our true Treasure – the Promised One – “*the assurance of things hoped for.*”

Let us pray.

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (BCP, Proper 20, p234)

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, August 8, 2010, The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 14, Year C.