

ⁱStages of Faith

^{NRS} **Genesis 12:1-2** Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

Mark 9:22-24 ^{NRS} It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." ²³ Jesus said to him, "If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes." ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

^{NRS} **Hebrews 5:12 - 6:1** ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God,

Stages of Faith

For three weeks now, we've been digging in the scriptures, looking at faith and belief. In all of that searching and studying it's become apparent that faith and belief are very similar terms. But we've also come to realize just how rich and thick these two little words are. They aren't as simple and skinny as the ways that we usually use them. There's more to faith and belief than figuring out the facts and agreeing with them. There's more even than saying, I can't prove it, but I believe it's true.

In looking at several scriptures, we've seen how faith and belief involve not only thinking that some things are true, but also that faith and belief involve trusting, living in fidelity, and having a vision of the love of God that surrounds and supports us. We've learned how believing is also about believing, about our relationship with God. God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6) All the time. No ifs, ands, or buts. That is God's character, God's personality, it's who and what God is. That's God's relationship with us.

Faith and belief are about our response, our relationship with God. We have a long way to go before our relationship with God bears very much resemblance to God's relationship with us. Still, that is the goal. Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mat 5:48 ^{NRS}) Some of us want to just shut down and give up when we hear that verse. No one's perfect, we say. That's impossible. I'm doomed to fail. But the word here means to be complete, to be fully developed, mature, and full grown. Those are things that we can do. This is about growing toward a goal, about progress. Or, as we often put it, this is about the journey of faith.

When we talk about a journey of faith, Abraham comes to mind. Abraham went on a physical journey, but it was also a faith journey. God told Abraham to leave home and "go to a land I will show you." Without giving it some thought, we might see Abraham's faith as huge, as full-grown. Look what he did. He left all of his roots, all that he knew, and stepped out blindly to wherever God would direct him. But in Romans 4:20, Paul talks about how Abraham grew strong in his faith. He wasn't born with great faith. He didn't acquire great faith suddenly. No, he grew in his faith. It was a process, a journey. That is what we are all called to do – leave the home of our habits, our comforts, our outlook on life – leave life as we have known it and journey to a better place that God will show us – and on the journey our faith will grow deeper and stronger.

The journey has a starting point, a beginning. The first step is simple belief in God. It's a start, but it isn't where you want to settle in and stay. In one of those challenging and startling passages, James tells us, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe-- and shudder." Believing that there is a God is a start, but if you use it as a rest stop the company isn't very good.

Both the writer of the letter to the Hebrews and the apostle Paul in First Corinthians talk about how we need to eat on this journey. We start with milk, but if we're going to get anywhere, then more substantial nourishment is needed. If we're going to go very far up the trail on our faith journey, we need solid food. You don't start on a hike in the Blue Ridge on an empty stomach. If you're setting out on a lifelong faith journey, you need to plan to take some nourishment along the way. It's no wonder that scripture talks about eating the words of God! Those who say, "I believe in God and I can worship on the golf course," are hung up at the first rest stop. Those who are chewing on scripture in Sunday School, in Bible study classes, and are finding books to read that will teach them more than they already know, those are the folks who will progress up the trail because they have strength for the journey.

It's important to know where you're headed. Journeys have beginnings and they have destinations. In Galatians 2:19, Paul describes the destination of the journey of faith when he says, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." We're talking about a journey in this life. We're talking about where we're headed while we're still alive. Paul says, "My life is no longer about me. It's about how Christ fills me, inhabits me, lives in me." He says, "The life I live right now, right here in my flesh and blood, is a life of full, complete, saturated faith."

We don't get to that point in a moment. We may not reach the same complete faith that Paul describes. One thing is sure. We're to be headed in that direction. Our call is to seek that destination. Our life is to grow in faith, move up the trail, to be on the journey, not parked on the side of the road.

What does the journey look like? How does the scenery change? What can we hope for and what can we expect? We begin by believing that there is a God, a God who is more than us, greater than us, different from us. Gradually, we begin to have some trust in God. We feel the presence, the reality of love and begin to know that love comes from God.

We begin to find meaning in symbols and imagery. The cross starts to be more than two crossed sticks. Baptism isn't just getting wet, but takes on concepts of being born into another way of life, of cleaning up your act, of commitment to accepting an invitation into a better family of love and compassion. The bread and juice of communion move beyond being a ritual snack – to an enactment of how Christ welcomes us and nourishes us with wisdom and love.

We learn the stories of our ancestors in faith. We seek out the rules, wanting concrete guidance on exactly where the path lies. We want to get it right. We may feel that there are well defined absolutes. We must absolutely think such and such and do so and so. We must never think something else or do other certain things.

We find other travelers on the faith journey who have the same map, so to speak. Surrounded by like minds, we find comfortable and secure community. It's a warm and solid feeling that can feel like we've arrived and it's time to set up permanent camp. We're inclined to circle the wagons, put down roots, and build structures that cast our faith in ways that are resistant to change.

After a while, some begin to reflect on their faith. Questions bubble up in their minds. It might bother them that wide differences exist between various Christian groups – each of whom is sure that they are the only true expression of Christianity. They might notice the unloving behavior of some Christians – and the very compassionate behavior of some non-Christians – and that might make them wonder. They might find themselves surprised at the lofty values of some other faith traditions. As they think about the Biblical stories that they learned in earlier times, they may wonder if some of them point to great lessons and deep truths while not necessarily being exact factual historical accounts. Any of this may cause a "dark night of the soul," a time of confusion. That often changes to a sense that there must be more to faith and belief than what they've experienced so far.

At this point, some people sift through all that they've learned and all that they've experienced and they begin to find truth that comes not from acceptance of what they've been taught so much as truth that fits with all that they've learned and experienced. By being open to the nudging of the Holy Spirit, they see their faith more clearly, often in a brighter but different light than before. People examine doctrines,

teachings, and ideas that they encounter and ask, "Is this truly of God, or is it time to let this go?" This is a point where there aren't as many on the trail. Many have ceased to journey. It seems safer to domesticate God and only take him out on Sundays for a brief visit. Those who keep going . . . hear and own the Biblical stories with renewed appreciation and deeper understanding. They begin to see God in all aspects of life. God is understood in more positive ways than previously, and trust in God's goodness, God's love, and God's providence is stronger than ever before.

As that trust strengthens, one begins to surrender their attachment to other things and other concerns. One's worries relax and cares are released. So much that seemed important . . . slips into being inconsequential. Gradually, things that aren't important to God . . . lose their importance to us. Jealousies, ambition, self-importance, ego, and competitiveness diminish as we start to be who we really are. We truly feel a sense of being born into a new life and a new family. With child-like trust we really sense God as our very own loving father, as Abba. We discover that Christ is our brother, our big brother, our guide. We feel so much a part of the family that we haven't the foggiest idea who we are apart from God. We are, in a very real way, in the image of God. And so, made a little lower than the angels, we come to realize that we are holy, we are children in a holy family, and that is our true identity.

The destination is that high sounding word, sanctification. That's the condition of being completely what God created us to be. In that supreme state of faith we are truly devoted to loving God and neighbor. We are all about compassion and justice. We are totally engrossed in doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with the family, our Father, our Brother, and the Holy Spirit of the Holy unity. We no longer sense fear or risk. We can risk all for the sake of justice, for the sake of kindness. At this point, there's no difficulty in understanding Paul. Those who take the journey this far can say, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

It's a long, long journey. At times, there are bends in the road and we can't be exactly sure of what lies immediately ahead. Frankly, there are moments that can be a bit scary. Every now and then, growth in faith can have growth pains. None of us are at the same point in our faith journey. None of us travel the path at the same speed. So we should be kind to our fellow travelers. Each of us was once where others now are in our rear view mirror. All of us have a long way yet to go. This isn't a race against each other. And while the destination is so glorious that we all should yearn to reach that stage of faith that is called sanctified, there is much joy and contentment in the journey itself. Enjoy the journey. Soak up the experience of growing in faith. Always look forward to the next stretch in the trail. Give me a smile as you pass by. Amen

James 2:19-22 NRS ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe-- and shudder. ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.

Rom 4:20-22 NRS No distrust made him [Abraham] waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² Therefore his faith¹ "was reckoned to him as righteousness."

1 Corinthians 3:1-2 And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready,