

When Megan asked Susan and me to consider a few dates to preach, we looked at our calendars and the lectionary to see what might work. This Sunday looked pretty good, we were in town, this was a familiar passage, so it shouldn't be too difficult to come up with 8 to 10 minutes, right? Not so fast. Drilling down into the scripture quickly proved to be more challenging than I anticipated, not because there is little, but because there is so much. As I began to write, I remembered what my high school public speaking teacher said to the class on the first day:

The rules that good speakers follow are: show up, stand up, speak up and shut up.

I will try to keep those rules in mind.

Belief is something that has become more difficult for me, or at least more complex, as I have grown older. This is due to several reasons: maybe I am wiser, I certainly have more experience on which to draw, I question more, I am more opinionated, and maybe just a wee bit cynical.

When I think back to my earliest beliefs, what rises to near the top is Santa Claus. In my home, we were told that Santa brought the presents. There were some expectations attached to this—we needed to be good and listen to what our parents, teachers or other adults told us to do, we had to be nice to our siblings, we had to do some chores around the house, and we had to keep our rooms straight. And then without fail, something magical happened and on Christmas morning, the gifts arrived. Pretty sweet, huh? That Santa must really love us!

But when I was around 6 or 7 years old, my belief in Santa started to weaken. I remember one Christmas morning unwrapping a package and finding a price tag still attached. My father hurriedly grabbed it and removed the tag. When I asked about that, my mother said that Santa sometimes needed to shop too, being unable to make everything in his workshop. Later that same Christmas, I heard that Santa sent the parents a bill for toys delivered. A seed of disbelief had been planted, but I still went along with Santa Claus, because if I didn't believe, it might mean that the presents would no longer arrive.

As you might surmise, it wasn't too long before the mythology of Santa had faded from my belief system, but the presents still came, and, in fact, they still do-- if I am good. Both of our readings today involve a story of belief.

In Genesis, we are introduced to Abram, a descendent of Noah, who hears from God that he is to gather his family and possessions together and leave to move to a new, unknown place where Abram will found a new nation. So, Abram does just as God directs, with no questions, no argument, and no consultation with anyone. I want to shout "Wait! What!?!!" I don't know how things work in your household, but this is not the way that it happens in my household. I don't think that I would be able to take that kind of risk. I certainly can't make a decision of this importance unilaterally. This must have been a tremendous test of belief for Abram, to leave his home for parts unknown, no plan or roadmap, simply his belief in God. This was quite a nudge from God. I expect that Abram caught some grief for his belief as well.

Then, as I read and re-read the Gospel for today, that very familiar passage, John 3:16 became the central passage in my mind, with the key word being “believes”.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

This seems pretty straight forward. And besides that, everyone knows this passage. You see it on bumper stickers, letterhead, posters, keychains, tee shirts, you name it. Martin Luther, that 16<sup>th</sup> century priest and theologian, was quoted as saying that this passage is the gospel in miniature. Maybe at this point, remembering the basic rules of public speaking, and remembering that Nike slogan, I should say “Just do it!” and sit down.

Unfortunately, you are not going to get off that easily.

What did the writer mean when he said believes? How can we make this more than a Macy’s shopping bag with Believes! printed across it in bold face? And how do we put this in the context of those times and our time?

Historians write that in 1<sup>st</sup> Century C. E., society in the Middle East was experiencing an upheaval, with the expanding reach of the Roman empire, the change in economic systems to a monetary rather than a bartering system, the seemingly continual fighting among and between various nations, empires and tribes, and for the Jews, the ancient hope for the appearance of the Messiah to save them. These were God’s chosen people! If you read from the works of Josephus, an early Jewish historian, there were numerous individuals in Israel and surrounding lands, preaching, performing magic, gathering crowds and claiming to be the Messiah. So how and who were the people supposed to believe? This is what Nicodemus had to confront.

Are we any better off 2,000 years later? Were Jesus to be with us in human form today, I think that he would be dismayed and disappointed by society’s tendency to lean toward disbelief so often in many challenges that we face:

- Climate change.

- Sea level rise.

- Epidemics and pandemics.

- Vaccines.

- Election results.

- Racism.

So how are we, as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian church expected to approach belief in a concept like the Son of God or life eternal? This is an inscrutable dilemma.

The earlier verses in Chapter 3 of John provide some direction.

John tells us that Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, came to Jesus by night. The Pharisees were the most devout of the Jews, knowing and keeping all the laws of the Temple,

following all religious practices and rules, and studying the Torah. And as a leader of the Jews, he may have been a member of the Sanhedrin, the body that, along with the priests, directed the work and policies of the Temple and served as a tribunal of elders. I guess that here at Trinity, the equivalent might be called senior warden. He comes to Jesus by night so as not to be observed by the community, for to be seen by someone might imply that he was a follower of Jesus, and this would not sit well with his associates. It may also mean that he was in the darkness of his understanding of Jesus. Nicodemus tells Jesus that he knows that Jesus acts in the presence of God, but he still has questions. Jesus, putting his explanation in human terms, speaks of the need to be born from above, born anew, comparing the spirit to the wind, experiencing ritual cleansing of baptism. Jesus speaks in metaphors, trying to give examples that might clarify Nicodemus' understanding and to make Nicodemus think this through. Yet Nicodemus is still perplexed. Human words do not adequately describe heavenly things. To Nicodemus, these descriptions seem impossible. Jesus extends a challenge:

*If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?*

There you have it--the challenge for us. It is human nature to be attracted to tangible things, that relate to something that we think that we know. We want to receive information easily with complete definition. We seek plausibility. But God speaks a different language. We can't really explain what or why God does what God does with our inadequate human words. We can't know with certainty, with empirical evidence, what God's plans are. We can't see or touch God.

We can gather together as seekers, worshipping, discussing, debating, reading and writing, to try to discern the Word of God. We are called on to open God's gift to us, peeling back layer upon layer of wrapping paper in the form of inspired words, seeking guidance and understanding, experiencing God.

I struggle with how to simply experience rather than trying to explain God. I know that I fall more into the Nicodemus camp than the Abram camp. But if I try to be more in the moment, looking for evidence around me, and I work at developing a heightened awareness, I sense God's presence more fully.

Last week Megan talked about invitation. I believe that in this passage, Jesus is extending an invitation to us to experience God. God's kingdom is here, now, all around us. If we accept the invitation, and if we believe, then we must take action, following those simple directions that Jesus gave us: love God and love our neighbors. Easy to say, difficult to practice.

I am comforted by the knowledge that God's love has placed us in the Kingdom, not because we are deserving of this gift, but solely because God loves the world. It is difficult for me to fathom this gift, given all of the evil that humankind seems to embrace. But I can accept that we, too, in all of our imperfections, are a part of God's kingdom. God with us, whether we understand or not. It is important for us to keep trying. So, lace up your Nikes. We are called to follow Jesus' direction:

Believe! Just do it!

Amen