

## COSMIC FAITH

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25

People's convictions can lead them to do some crazy things. Not long ago there was an article in my local paper about a woman whose faith was leading her to walk the length of the Appalachian Trail. That's a trail, 3500 kilometers long, through the mountains that run the length of the east coast of the United States, from the state of Georgia in the south to the state of Maine in the north. She brushed off the facts that she was 60 years old, 50 pounds overweight, out of shape, had serious foot problems and only one working lung. One of her pastor's sermons had inspired her to walk the trail in order to raise money for a clean water project in Africa, and she had faith. A few weeks later there was a follow up story in the paper – she had been carried off the trail after hiking only three days.

Of course, not all earnest but ill-advised acts of faith are so benign. Passion for a perverse understanding of Christianity has fueled so-called Christian identity hate groups that believe white Europeans are God's chosen people and that others, of a different faith or a darker skin, should be treated as second class human beings. The self-styled Islamic State has broadened its recruiting reach into the West by appealing to disaffected youth with the promise of a kind of faith that will give their lives meaning and purpose.

So, you can understand how someone might be skeptical when they hear the apostle Paul encouraging us to live a life of faith. Faith can be used to justify lots of questionable things. How do we sort it out? Can you respond to God in faith without being irrational? Can we be passionate about what we believe without being fanatical?

Let's be clear what we're talking about when we talk about faith. When Paul in his letter to the Romans speaks of faith, he means something specific, a particular kind of faith. He's not talking about faith in yourself or faith in your cause or faith in your future. It's not the faith of Tinker Bell or Jiminy Cricket that assures us "You gotta believe!" and all your wishes will come true. No, Paul tells us to have faith in God

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whom we know through Jesus. That faith joins us with the work God is doing to reclaim the world. It makes your life part of God's work.

Abraham is an example of that kind of faith. Like many couples, Abraham and his wife Sarah wanted a child with all their heart, but by the time they reached their 90s, they had given up on that hope. By then, even Viagra wouldn't have helped. But when Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah was 90, God told them that they would have a son. Of course, that was a personal blessing, an answer to their prayers, but it was more than that. God told Abraham that he would be the ancestor of a multitude of nations, and it was through his offspring that God was going to bless the whole world. God would make himself known through Abraham and Sarah's descendants, the people of Israel, and out of Israel would come the Messiah who gave himself to reclaim all creation for God. God chose this couple whose biological clock had long since stopped ticking – Paul says that Abraham's body was "as good as dead" – so there would be no question that God, not human strength or stamina, was responsible.

And God chose two people who couldn't claim to deserve such a blessing because of their good and righteous life. In one of those Bible stories we don't usually teach the children in Sunday school, we learn that when Abraham and Sarah were much younger, they had to migrate to Egypt because of a famine. As we know from the news today, migrants sometimes have to do desperate things to survive in a place where people look down on them with suspicion. Sarah was a beautiful young woman, and Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, saw her and was attracted to her. Abraham told Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister, and he gave her to Pharaoh as a wife so Pharaoh would favor him as a member of the family. Eventually, Pharaoh found out who Sarah really was, and he expelled both of them from Egypt. Years later, after Sarah reached a certain age without a child, she gave her maid Hagar to Abraham so he could father a child with her. This couple that God chose weren't examples of physical or moral strength, but God chose them, blessed them, gave them faith and made them an important part of God's plan to restore justice and peace and goodness to all creation.

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The rest of the Bible is more or less the continuation of that story. This same God who created a universe out of nothing and gave a son to a couple whose bodies were as good as dead, this same God keeps calling people, often those of little standing or merit, to have a part in the work of reclaiming humanity from the power of evil and of death. When Israel was enslaved by Egypt, the world's strongest empire, God led them to freedom and gave them a Promised Land. God chose a shepherd boy to be their king and the ancestor of the Christ, even though David showed himself to be no paragon of virtue when he seduced Bathsheba and then murdered her husband. At the right time Christ died so that the promise to Abraham was extended to include all people, not just the direct descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Through Christ that promise and that blessing that God gave to Abraham was extended to us. And we receive it the same way that Abraham did – through faith. We have faith that in Christ God has claimed us and made us part of what God is doing to restore the world to himself.

It's hard to imagine living a life of faith until you do it. When I was eight years old, I couldn't imagine living apart from my parents. It was just inconceivable. But by the time I turned 17, I couldn't wait to get out of the house. Something about my orientation on life had changed so that what was once unthinkable became desirable. Then when I was out on my own, the thought of being married was oppressive – until I met the right person, and then my whole orientation on life changed again. It was the same with becoming a parent. It was inconceivable until it happened, and then it was inconceivable to be otherwise. I'm finding the same thing happen as I consider retirement. It used to be something for "those old people" but each year it grows more appealing. There are some things you just can't understand until you're caught up in them, and faith is one of those things.

Faith isn't something you enter into once and then you stay the same. Like any relationship that is alive and growing, our relationship with the risen Christ grows as we're called more deeply into the work he is doing. There's a story about how Martin

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Luther King Jr. was called more deeply into faith. In 1955, a year after being called as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Alabama at the age of 25, he was chosen to be the spokesperson for the Montgomery Improvement Association. In those days in the American South, there were laws that required African Americans to sit in the back of the bus. An African American woman named Rosa Parks had recently been arrested for refusing to move from the seat she had taken at the front of a bus, and the Montgomery Improvement Association was calling for a boycott of the city buses until the law was changed. Shortly after becoming the leader of that effort, King started receiving phone calls threatening his life and the lives of his wife and baby daughter. One night a caller told him to leave town within three days or his house would be firebombed. Unable to sleep, he went to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee. He prayed, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what is right. I think I'm right. I think the cause I represent is right. But I'm weak now. I'm faltering and I'm losing my courage." Then he heard a voice saying, "Stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth, and 'Lo, I will be with you to the end of the world.'" King would later say that it was that assurance, that faith that sustained him through the struggle that lay ahead, which led to a Nobel Peace Prize, the dismantling of the American system of apartheid, and his eventual martyrdom.

Kayla Mueller's faith drew her into God's work of reclaiming the world for love and goodness when she was a young teenager and volunteered to serve in a homeless shelter. In high school she organized a protest to raise awareness of the genocide in Darfur and won recognition for her work with volunteer organizations that fight poverty. When she was a student at university, she was active in the campus ministry. She went on several mission trips where she saw first-hand how God was at work in places like India and Palestine. After college, she went to the Turkey-Syria border to work with a Danish refugee organization. The campus ministry at her university raised money to support her work. On August 3, 2013 she and a friend went to a Doctors without Borders hospital in Syria to repair the Internet connection. On their

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way back to the bus station they were captured by the Islamic State. No one heard from her until the following spring when her family received a letter that described how she found God's presence in a situation where many would reflect on God's absence. She wrote:

"I remember mom telling me that in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator because literally there was no one else. By God and by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in free fall. I have been shown in darkness, light, and learned that even in prison one can be free. I am grateful; I have come to see that there is good in every situation; sometimes we just have to look for it. I pray each day that if nothing else, you have a certain closeness and surrender to God as well and have formed a bond of love and support amongst one another."

On February 15, 2015, Kayla's family learned from the Islamic State that she had been killed. She was 26 years old. Her campus pastor, the Rev. Kathleen Day, said, "I'm going to counsel my students that anyone can respond to suffering. It's OK if you never feel called to leave your community. You don't have to travel the world. Suffering is right before us everywhere, and we're just called to see it – to respond to it and have an expression of joy, kindness and advocacy for those who don't have a voice. That's what Kayla loved and practiced."

Through faith we have the that same power that shaped the cosmos guarding us, giving us strength, and drawing us into the work Christ is doing to save the whole creation, from redeeming your soul and mine from the power of sin, to bringing peace and hope to those who suffer, to breaking the shackles of oppression. Whether at a bedside in a hospital or teaching a child about Jesus or in a prison in Syria, it's all part of what God was doing when God stirred life in Sarah's barren womb, when God removed the stone from the grave of Jesus, when God stirs in the depths of your heart.