

Sunday, August 7, 2022

Proper 14, Year C, RCL, Track 2

[Genesis 15:1-6](#)

[Psalm 33:12-22](#)

[Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16](#)

[Luke 12:32-40](#)

Good morning. I am Amanda Talbot, Executive Director of SLYC, a nonprofit in West Baltimore City. I am here today with my very good friend, Darlene Clark, who is also our engagement coordinator and a grandma to every child she meets. Also with us today is TyJuan. TyJuan is a young man who has grown up with us and who is heading off to college in just a couple of weeks. We are honored to be here today as your guests, to share our work with you, and to reflect on today's readings. I feel blessed.

I am blessed. In fact, every single one of us is blessed. And guess what, I know that to be true. I also know that it can be difficult to recognize those blessings as often as we could or should. I imagine that most of us question our faith and question God's presence in our lives. We question our faith, in part, because we don't always recognize the need for faith in our largely self-determined lives.

When I was a child, a wee PK (priest's kid) growing up in St. Mark's on the Hill rectory, I went to church because I was told to go, and it was right there, right across the driveway. I prayed every night before bed because it was part of my routine like brushing my teeth and sorting the stuffed animals piled high from the top of my bed to the bottom, so I could actually get in. I went to Sunday school and listened to the stories but never quite understood how they related to my life. But, they were nice stories and I had good friends there. And for the most part, I liked the adults. My parents taught me to be good, kind, generous, and patient. That made sense because those qualities are what I want to see in other people. It is how I want to be treated. I was living a godly life, right? I was able to check all the boxes.

If I needed something or wanted something, I would get it (for the most part maybe not so much as a kid; that was almost entirely up to my parents). But, now, as an adult, if I want something I just work for it or I ask others to help me achieve it. If I fail, if I don't get it, it's usually for no other reason than I got lazy, disinterested, had bad luck, didn't try hard enough, don't know the right people,

We move through our days making choices, reaping the rewards of good choices and suffering the consequences of poor ones. When the good choices outweigh the poor choices we are able to move toward our goals. Maybe we want to send our child off to college, maybe we want to throw a family reunion, take a vacation, or buy that new house. Our choices lead us to such outcomes. We may have faith but do we really need faith?

What did I need church for? What did I need faith for? If I had faith, it was convenient like a hope or a wish. In Hebrews, it says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." But my assurance of things hoped for came from me, my actions, and my choices. My convictions were based on things that I could actually see with my own two eyes. That wasn't a very strong or confident faith. It certainly wasn't the kind of faith I'd bet the farm on.

Who knew that having so much, so much love, so many resources, so many opportunities, and choices, who knew how much I was truly missing?

It wasn't until I was faced with situations that had no options, no choices, and no ability to influence the outcomes, that I found the conviction of my faith. I found it in a place of vulnerability. And vulnerability usually only comes when you are in situations that you do not really want to be in. Those situations are not comfortable or convenient. They are scary. They are strange and foreign. They are sad and often lonely. Sometimes they are absolutely devastating.

What good can come from this amount of pain? I would argue, *not* that blessings and faith come from the pain, I don't think that at all. I would argue that it is when we are at our most vulnerable when we can not turn to choices or options that we experience our faith and witness those blessings most clearly.

When I began working in West Baltimore, like Abraham, I set out not knowing where I was headed. Well figuratively, literally I knew I was headed to an area of my beloved City with high crime rates, high poverty, and failing schools. But, unlike Abraham, it was not God's voice that I heard. Rather, it was my dad's. My faith in God may have been weak, but my faith in my dad was strong, so I went.

And when I went, do you know how I felt?

Strangely confident. Why not? If I was able to use my master's degree in education and 12 years of experience as a "highly effective" teacher to children in suburban communities if I was able to make the choices needed to reach my goals, then why couldn't I share some of that knowledge and expertise with others.

Do you know how I felt within a month of teaching in a Baltimore City public school?

I felt vulnerable and scared, frustrated, and confused. No matter what I did and how hard I tried, the beautifully brilliant children in my classroom were not meeting the goals that I or the school, or others had set for them.

As I got to know my students and their families, I witnessed firsthand the impact of generational poverty, trauma, society's neglect, and society's outright contempt for my beloved friends, families, and children. I felt devastated.

There was nothing I could do *but* pray. However, this time, not like I did as a child. It wasn't part of a nightly routine or a spoken wish anymore. I began praying with persistence and determination. It was in this darkness, this desperation and hopelessness that I began to see the blessings all around me. The infinite miracles every day that I had missed before.

My desperate prayers did not fix the problems, but rather they opened my eyes. Small lights that in my previously bright spaces had gone completely unnoticed, now, in my darkness were as bright and infinite as the stars in the sky. I began to recognize my many blessings and witness the daily miracles that surrounded me.

Think of it. My friend, a mom of 6, raising her children on her own because two fathers have died from violence works 6 of 7 days out of the week, and still lives in poverty in a home without reliable electricity. Her strength and determination are a miracle. Her children making it to school at all is a miracle. Her showing up when SLYC needs her is a miracle. Her oldest daughter going to one of the best high schools in the city is a miracle. Her getting out of bed each day to face all that she has to face is a miracle. And despite it all, her faith is unwavering. Now, that's a miracle. Her faith has feet that take action. Her faith keeps her moving toward God's promise.

I continue to be astounded by the amount of faith among my friends in our West Baltimore community. They do not have many choices in their lives; they never have. No matter how hard they try, they have never had the kind of opportunities and options in their lives that were just handed to me. And yet, there is a confidence of faith despite the pain and hardships. People in our community recognize their blessings with absolute clarity.

How could my faith have been so weak, with all that I have? Working at SLYC and in West Baltimore has opened my eyes to the truth of God's presence. It has emboldened me to let faith inform and animate how I live my life.

Faith orients my life toward the promise that God has already put in my heart. That promise is already in all of our hearts. It is a vision of a life of love, peace, decency, justice, compassion, and wholeness. It is up to us to allow that vision to inform the way we live our lives every day- in our job, at home, and wherever we go.

This is not faith as an intellectual exercise. It is not faith as a commodity that can be used however and whenever it suits us. It is not a checklist or a set of rules or simple answers. This is faith that has feet, it has action.

God called Abraham to leave a place that he knew, where he was familiar and told him to go to a distant land, an unfamiliar land. God promised him that if he acted on faith and trusted that God would shield his journey, he would be rich with blessings beyond anything he could imagine. Sounds to me like Abraham was a man whose faith had feet.

How often do we set off in life, not knowing where we are going? Most of us don't go anywhere unless we have a pretty good idea that it will lead us to where we have chosen to go. Anywhere we go will have struggles, difficulties, and problems. But, if we allow the potential struggles to inform our decisions, will we ever go? And if we go and our faith is not strong, will it become so hard that we turn around and head back? Do we trust God will shield us and... just keep walking?

Every one of us does know what it's like to start something not quite knowing where it will lead. A new baby, a new carrier, heading off to college. It is certainly the case in my work with SLYC. The vulnerability, fear, struggles, and hardships are all very real. But, holding onto that confident faith, that persistent and determined prayer, I have been born again, and again, and again. In every new friendship, in every new challenge I overcome, in every new experience, I have been born again.

If we orient our lives toward the promise that God has already put in our hearts and are willing to set out, not knowing where we are going, putting our trust in God, then our blessing will surely be great.

And, on that journey, when you do find yourself in the darkest of places which you most surely will, all you need to do is look toward heaven and count the stars, for so shall your blessings be.