

Spring Lake Presbyterian Church
Rev. Kathryn M. Treadway
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Hebrews 12:18-29

18You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, 19and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. 20(For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” 21Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”) 22But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. 25See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! 26At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” 27This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. 28Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; 29for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

The Great Pretender: Faith and Doubt (Faith Series #3)

(Story as told by Belden C. Lane, *The Christian Century*, in [A Guide to Retreat for All God’s Shepherds](#) by Rueben P. Job.)

There is a wonderful story set in Eastern Europe at the end of the 18th century. “There in the village of Bobov, in the region of the rich, black earth of Galicia north of the Carpathian Mountains, a [rabbi] lived and prayed among his small community of poor, Hasidic Jews. One day a couple came to the [rabbi] to ask him to pray for them, explaining that they had never had a child, though they had waited in patient silence for years. They knew the prayers of the [rabbi] were able to shake the very gates of heaven itself. So they were jubilant when he said that not only would he pray for them, but he would tell them a story as well. That was better yet!

He spoke of three Hasidim who one year had longed to spend the High Holy Days with the great Lubliner [rabbi], [Rabbi] Yaakov-Yitzhak of Lublin, also known as the Holy Seer. This fascinating [rabbi], blind in one eye but steeped in the wisdom of [the Holy scripture], could see, it was said, ‘from one end of the world to the other.’ People came to Lublin to study, to meditate, to sit in the shadow of the great seer. Anxious to join this company, the three Jews set out early one fall morning. Without food, without money, they determined to walk all the way to the Polish border and beyond. But after several days without eating, they grew weak with hunger. ‘Listen,’ one of the three finally said,

‘it’s no [good deed] that Jews should die of starvation on their way to see the Holy Seer of Lublin! We’ve got to do something! According to [the Holy Scriptures], anything may be done to save a life.’ Another suggested that one of them disguise himself as a [rabbi.] Then whenever they came to a village, people would welcome them warmly, thinking it an honor they should be visited by a [rabbi]. In this way, at least they’d be fed. None of them wanted to practice deceit, but reluctantly they drew straws and the unfortunate one became the pretending [rabbi]. A second one dressed up like his gabbai, an assistant working in the house of study; and the third would simply be a Hasid from the community.

On they walked until they came to the next village. There they were greeted with cries of delight: ‘A [rabbi] is coming! A [rabbi] is coming!’ They were taken to the inn, and the innkeeper, after seeing to their needs, spoke in great anguish. [‘Rabbi,’], he said, ‘you must pray for my son. He lies dying on his bed at this moment; the doctors say there’s no hope. But the Holy One, blessed be His name, may at last respond to your prayers, now that you’ve come.’ The [‘rabbi’] looked at his companions to ask what he should do. They motioned him to go with the father. ‘Don’t talk.’ They said. ‘Just go with him.’ There was nothing else to do. Having begun pretending, one had to finish.

That night the three slept restlessly. The next morning the grateful father, hoping the prayer might yet be heard, sent away the [rabbi] and his [companions,] having loaned them a carriage and a matched pair of sable horses for the remainder of their trip. On they went to Lublin, where they spent the days following Rosh Hashana in glorious study and prayer, under the spell of the Lubliner [rabbi.] With his words the spiced wine of [the Holy Scriptures] flowed through their minds and veins. But then came the end of Yom Kippur and the time to return home – back the way they had come, back through the same village once more, back to return the carriage and matched sable pair they had borrowed. The [rabbi] pretender was especially fearful. His heart was in this throat as he approached the village and saw the innkeeper running toward them, furiously waving his arms in the air. But, to the [‘rabbi’s’] joy and relief, the father embraced him, crying, [‘Rabbi,’] thank you for your prayers! One hour after you left, my son got out of bed and has been perfectly well ever since! The doctors say it is impossible, but he lives!’ The other two Jews looked strangely at the pretending [rabbi.] Had he really been a [rabbi] all along, without telling them?

Later he explained that he had gone to the bedside of the child and stood there in silence, as they had told him to do. Then he started to think, ‘Master of the Universe, this man and his child ought not to be punished because they think I’m a [rabbi.] What am I? I’m nothing! Just a pretender! After I leave, the child will probably die and the father will be tempted to think that a [rabbi] can do nothing. So, [Great Teacher], Master of the Universe, not because of me, but because of the man and his faith, can it hurt that the child be healed?’ He had done nothing more than that, he said. Strange that such an artless and inadvertent prayer should be heard and answered.

Having finished his story, the [rabbi] who had been speaking to the [childless] couple then said he would pray for them as he had promised. With tired eyes he looked to

heaven and, taking upon himself the anguish of every childless couple in the world, he prayed, ‘Master of the Universe, this man and his wife ought not to be punished because they think I’m a [rabbi.] What am I? I’m nothing! Just a pretender. We all are pretenders! So, not because of anything that I am, but because of the couple and their patient faith, can it hurt that they be given a child?’ The people of the village of Bobv swear that a year later the man and his wife brought their eight-day-old son to the [rabbi] for *bris*, for circumcision – the son who had been born in answer to a story that was told and an even stranger prayer that was said.”

We’ve spent the last few weeks talking about faith – speaking of doubts and of loneliness on our journeys of faith – and talking about the surprises that meet us on our journeys. When we feel alone, overwhelmed by the responsibility to share our faith with the world, we learned last week that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. We are surrounded by those who have gone before us, by those who even now experience the fullness of joy and understanding in the presence of the Living Lord God.

When we doubt, we are given hope through the stories of those who have kept the faith through times of terrible trial and through the peace they received when keeping the faith through times of difficulty. We are given hope through the larger story in which we can see God’s hand working through time, across generations, where we observe the faith of one being sustained by the faith of a father or a grandmother or a great-grandmother.

Today we approach faith once again, this time focusing a third time on what we can not see. Hebrews 12 tells us that we do not come to the Holy Mountain as Moses did – where he himself saw God and felt the earth quake with the power of God, but we come to Mount Zion *and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

On Sunday mornings, we come together to worship that which we can not see. We come frequently as Great Pretenders, knowing that in the presence of the great Master of the Universe we are nothing! But trusting in the faith of others who, we feel, do not deserve to be punished for our imperfect faith. We pray pretenders prayers, overshadowed by doubt, overshadowed by our own imperfect humanity. And in the midst of that, we hope beyond hope that we actually do come to the city of the living God.

The letter to the Hebrews is a reminder of that hope beyond hope. It is a reminder that beyond what we can see, beyond the created order of things, lies an un-shakable kingdom. It is a reminder that we must listen to the One who speaks from heaven, the One who can shake the heavens and the earth, the One whose fiery voice is capable of refining our faith into that which is unshakable.

Oh, yes, we’re the great Pretenders (ooh-a, ooh-a!). We ourselves are not capable of performing miracles. We ourselves are not capable of creating the perfect church. We ourselves are not capable of understanding the rationale God has for the varied hardships on this earth. But Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not

see. Faith requires that we step into the city of the living God and we pray, "Master of the Universe, I am nothing!" knowing that God alone is everything. Faith requires that we pray, "O Great Teacher, Master of the Universe, can it hurt that our children be healed? That our spouses be made well? That our wars be ended? That our leadership follow your ways? That our poor be fed? That our suffering be given hope? Can it hurt, O Great One, that our dear friend be returned to Faith? Not because of me and my semblance of faith, but because of Jesus who mediated great faith for this friend's family? Because of Jesus who mediated great faith for the world's peace? Because of Jesus who mediated great faith for the world's suffering?"

This must be our prayer as we enter the City of God in worship on Sunday mornings and Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. We must pray fervently, even as Pretenders ourselves, and watch as God uses those prayers to build both our faith and the faith of others, as God uses those prayers to bless us and to bless others. *28Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for mediated by the great faith of Jesus who preceded us, God can use even the humble faith of Great Pretenders. Amen.*