

Holy One – We are here. Listening. Hoping to hear you afresh. Speak words of life to our weary souls once more. Amen.

What is faith? Take about 30 seconds or so to answer that question and then I want you to put the answers you come up with either in the chat box or the comments section and I'll be sure to read them later today and tomorrow. Ok – What is faith? 30 Seconds... Go.

These past couple of weeks have been a transformative time for me in terms of my own image of faith. Not necessarily on the particulars of my faith, or the faith tradition of Christianity, but the much larger question of what is faith – in general. You see – it had not occurred to me really to ponder the question of faith separate from all the world religions. But now I see how limited that was...

There's two main factors that have led to this reorientation around the subject of faith – a groundbreaking book and my own shifting awareness. Over the past few months I have become profoundly, intimately aware of my mortality in ways that I have not been connected to before. There was a spell there where I went to sleep and woke up profoundly aware that death is how this ride ends. Thankfully, this shift in awareness

hasn't been scary or morbid, in fact it's actually been pretty helpful. The way a magnifying glass intensifies the heat of the sun, I am finding greater sense of clarity about the questions that are worth asking and the life that is worth pursuing.

I had assumed that my death awareness was in large part due to living through the pandemic this past year... So imagine my surprise when upon reading the first lines of James Fowler's classic, *Stages of Faith*, I encountered these lines: "Four a.m., in the darkness of a cold winter morning, suddenly I am fully and frighteningly awake. I see it clearly: I am going to die. *I am going to die...*" In those lines I saw myself... which was weird because I had not intended to encounter myself at all in this book.

I had picked it up primarily to help us think through curriculum and programing options for the childrens' and youth ministry – and yet here I was having myself reflected back to me. A powerfully affirming moment that certainly got my attention. Whatever this Fowler character wanted to say – I was now listening.

Read lots of children's and youth ministry books and you will see this book in the footnotes of many of them. What Fowler helped people to articulate and realize is that the enterprise of faith is about so much more than

ascribing to any tenets of belief or about belonging to a particular religion. Faith is first and foremost the endeavor of every human to make life make sense.

Fowler writes “We do not live by bread alone, sex alone, success alone and certainly not by instinct alone. We require meaning. We need purpose and priorities; we must have some grasp on the big picture.... [he goes on to say] Prior to our being religious or irreligious, before we come to think of ourselves as Catholics, Protestants, Jews or Muslims, we are already engaged with issues of faith. Whether we become nonbeliever, agnostics or atheists, we are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living. Moreover, we look for something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to honor and respect that has the power to sustain our being.”

This simple articulation – that the innate human quest for meaning is itself faith – and that faith is not exclusively the content that fills us in our longing for meaning. This realization has completely shifted the ground beneath my feet.

Fowler has presented me with an entirely different question to ask about faith... The question before me

now isn't whether you or I have faith or not... the question is what do you and I fill our faith with?

Friends, Take a moment - What do you fill your faith with?

For me, I fill my faith with the life of Jesus, with Scriptures, with ritual, with a community of others who together though apart place their trust in the words of Paul - "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,... nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And that's why we turn again to the stories that have been so helpful in the past to the work of faith...

Our Scripture passage today is the well-known story of God making a covenant with Abram and Sarai to bless them and make them the father and mother of a multitude of nations. What takes place in the preceding chapter is that God has gone and found Hagar in the wilderness and made promises to her that she also will be the mother of many nations. What you get in these parallel stories is God adapting to some changed circumstances.

When God made that first promise to Abram to bless him and make him fruitful, Hagar wasn't a part of the initial plan. She became a part of God's plan the moment Abram and Sarai treated her as expendable. God does not take that lightly - God tends to Hagar and makes sure she gets her words of promise and hope before resuming business with Abram and Sarai.

The people sharing these stories through the generations understood themselves to be descendants of Abram and Sarai and yet they told over and over again this story in such a way that Hagar's promise came first. They somehow knew – you don't get to Covenant, you don't get to blessing until the marginalized, the expendable have gotten their blessing first.

That doesn't take away from what God is doing with Abram and Sarai – in fact it makes it more just and honest. God had a plan, shared the plan... Abram and Sarai messed it up so God came back, this time with a revised Covenant. The commentaries all point out that Abram has already heard most parts of this promise before, so it's not new – it's a revision and as a sign of this new, revised covenant God gives new names – now at last they are Abraham and Sarah.

New names - new identifies in light of a revised image of the future.

It has taken me a really long time to realize that this pandemic is not a pause from my life; this pandemic is now a part of my life. Whatever images of my life that I had prior to this pandemic – they will all be informed, shaped and colored by the fact that I have pastored a year, parented a year, lived a year in a global pandemic that has claimed the lives of half a million people in this country.

When I consider the magnitude of what this year has meant on so many levels, it almost feels like a name change would be helpful to mark the significance. I have more appreciation for God's renaming. It's a useful device. There's a pre-pandemic me, and there will be a post-pandemic me... and yes they are certainly related, and almost identical... but they're not the same are they. There's a pre-pandemic you and there will be a post-pandemic you. While I don't advocate a name change for all of us... I do think it's time to honor the shift. To let go of what was and to embrace what will be as unclear and uncertain as it is right now. For if today's passage can teach us anything, and to be clear it can teach a lot - it is that if revision is good enough for God... It is certainly good enough for you and me. Amen.