

## Pastor Roy's sermon from September 2, 2018

Think. . .Old Testament. What comes to mind when you think of the Old Testament? Do you think of the people of Israel in the Old Testament as having a God who was near to them as the writer of Deuteronomy says? (For what other nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to God?) When we read the Old Testament, we meet many people who felt near to or distant from God. Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Tamar, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, Hannah, Samuel, Saul, David, Elijah and Elisha, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel and others—they all thought of God and faith in very personal terms. [pause]

Do **you** find God to be near when you call? . . .Or distant? Do you sense God's presence especially in the good times or more in times of **trouble and uncertainty**? Have you found that your faith has grown more when you were hard pressed? When the **comforts of the familiar** have been traded for **loss and unwanted newness**?

I've found that to be the case. Perhaps when we are forced to act in new ways and find ourselves thinking new thoughts, we realize some of the old ways and habits hadn't been working that well anyway. All of this takes time and can be very unpleasant. Wisdom and spiritual growth seem to come at a great price.

The writer of Deuteronomy says that the (1)wisdom of the law and (2)God's closeness to Israel will draw the nations to Israel. The Jews' faith in the law and sense of the nearness of God came to them in desperate times. Their faith became **their** faith when they could no longer coast, when they needed their faith to preserve them from totally losing their identity and any sense of purpose. It is so strange that the Jews find God's nearness in a foreign land. Their faith was "whatever!" in the comfort of easy times, but after their losses in battle, exile, and return to an uncertain home they clung to their faith.

The stories of their ancestors being freed from slavery in Egypt and wandering in the desert became their story of hope and salvation. Their faith was in a God who would never, ever disappoint. Yes, the deliverance and freedom was amazing but the journey was treacherous. The faith stories remind us that our hope is not built on triumph and success, but on the rock of God's mercy which raises us up from the ashes of pain and loss. The mercy of God flows from the mess of our failure to pull it off on our own. It's anything but pleasant, but our lives provide plenty of

opportunity for God's gift of faith is to be nurtured. We despair of trouble, but it is the only path to freedom.

It's just unfortunate that we often assume that trouble means we are doing something wrong. We sometimes assume that if we had faith, we would not struggle so much. But without the struggle, there is no faith. It is like a muscle. If we never use the muscle, it will break down and not be useful.

Deuteronomy and the story of the Jews faith also reminds us that faith is not my faith and your faith, but *our* faith. We are in this together. We are a community of faith. Our relationships with one another build our faith as much as Bible study and prayer.

The love and mercy of Christ was born out of the faith of the Jews, as it was reborn in exile. Jesus struggled mightily as he led his followers. His death was painful. He gave up his life in many ways. When we receive it at this table, it is a gift to strengthen our faith in our struggles and losses. It is the gift of life. May we partake of it with gratitude for the life and willing death of our Lord for the sake of mercy and justice. God is gracious. Mercy is free. May our faith grow with patient endurance. Amen.