



Church of St. John the Evangelist, Elora
October 22 2023 - Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Canon Paul Walker

What a pleasure to gather together yesterday for the annual Parish Retreat at the Museum with Canon Drew MacDonald under the theme of “Stages of Faith.” It is good just to be together with one another from different gathering points in the parish. Drew’s big thesis is that if faith is what God calls us to have, and faith grows out of belief, then how do we become mature in our faith? How do we grow our faith?

Drew took us through the various stages of faith development, described by James Fowler and simplified by Scott Peck.* It starts with the **chaotic** stage (which is quite antisocial, unprincipled and self-centred) and moves to the **formal** stage (which is very institutional based and somewhat rigid) through to the **sceptic** stage (which is focussed on the individual questioning things and maybe abandoning the whole enterprise as too literal, empty or hypocritical) and finally lands at the **mystic** stage (which is more communal as it embraces the mystery and ambiguity of life in all its paradoxes). The mystic stage of faith development has the most room to it. It is spacious rather than restrictive.

At any time in life we go back and forth in these stages of faith development evermore seeking some further depth at each stage. So it’s not a linear line of successive graduations, but rather a cyclical process

of growth, all for one purpose: that we might grow in our compassion for one another.

The Apostle Paul describes that all of us have been equipped with various roles in the community based on our gifts, and we exercise these gifts for one purpose: the building up of the body; so we can all come to “maturity, the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13).

I suspect that the description of Moses in our first reading today is a struggle through some significant stage of faith development.

Moses asks God, “who are you anyway? How do I know you are with me? After all, these are *your* people that you want me to lead, but I’m not doing this alone.” And Moses asks God an audacious thing: “Show me your glory.”

“I know your name, but I need to see your face.”

This might be described as the sceptic stage, but it’s a very reasonable question.

How do I know this is real? How do I know this isn’t all a fantasy of my imagination?

Time and time again in the scripture people are asking for a confirmation, or a sign. What *sign* are you going to give us that we can believe?

The showing of God’s glory, or what God is most known for, is what all the stories describe. From

Jacob, to Joseph, to Mary, Peter and Thomas there is a longing to see God's face.

Jacob was on the run from his brother, Esau, because he had stolen Esau's birthright and blessing and his brother was filled with murderous rage. Years passed and the night before Jacob was going to meet face to face with his brother, he wrestled with an angel all night long. "What is your name?" Jacob asks. "Why do you ask my name?" the stranger replies. And there this stranger blessed him, so Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "for I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved." The next day, Jacob filled with fear bows down low when he approaches to meet Esau, convinced he's going to die. He cannot look him in the face. Like the father of the prodigal son, Esau ran out to meet Jacob, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him. Jacob is expecting judgment and death, and instead is faced with grace and life. After Jacob offers him gifts, Esau says, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you."

God says the same thing to Moses and the people of Israel: "I will go alongside you." God says the same thing to Joseph with his brothers, "I will go alongside you." The angel says the same thing to Mary, "I am with you." And to Peter, Thomas and the apostle Paul, "I will go with you."

When Jesus is leaving the earth and returning to sit on the heavenly throne, and his followers are gazing up

into the clouds wondering what on earth is going to happen next, Jesus says, and "don't forget, I am with always, to the end of the earth."

Well how much more of a sign do we need?

"All these signs are written" St. John writes, "that you might come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life." For we have seen the glory of God, full of grace and truth.

Life was given to Jacob. Life was given to Moses and the Israelites. Life was given to Joseph and to Mary, Peter and Thomas. Even though they weren't always filled with faith or obedience. Even though they worshiped golden calves or denied Jesus or abandoned him. In spite of their faltering faith, God was always with him. Because the glory of this God is to uphold a promise, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

So, give to God the things are are God's, and to the Emperor the things that are the Emperors, recognizing always that we have seen God face to face, and the heaven and earth are *filled* with the glory of God. That's what we sing in the sanctus. The signs are everywhere. So when the offering is brought forward we hear the sentence: "Blessed be thou, Lord God of Israel, for ever and ever. All that it is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; all things come from thee and of thine own have we given thee."

*Fowler, James. "Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning," Harper: San Francisco, 1995.

Peck, Scott. "Further Along the Road Less Travelled: The Unending Journey Towards Spiritual Growth," Touchstone, 1998.