

“Believe – Grow into Salvation”  
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; Acts 7:55-60;  
1 Peter 2:2-20; John 14:1-14

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As we come this day and remember what God has given us as a word, we are reminded that it is also a day when we celebrate the gift of mothers—having a mother, having people who have shown us the characteristics of a mother. One of the central characteristics we think of in motherhood is that mothers have the best interests of their children in mind as they try to care for their children. So as we think about how we celebrate mothers, we think about that trust. Particularly as parents, if you are doing that mothering, or perhaps doing fathering as well, parenting, we recognize that a child trusts us. They have trust in the parent to do the best they can for them, to have their best interests at heart. We know that sometimes this doesn't work out, and there are failures. But the goal, what we think about and what we celebrate on this day is the ability for a mother to have the best interest of the child at heart and for the child to be able to trust in their mother.

It is that idea of trust that I want to think about today. Trusting is so central to who we are. We need to be able to trust our parents. We need to be able to trust our friends, our family, our church family. Where do we put our trust? We need to trust a person, and I'm going to say, the story. Because as we learn from a person, as we learn from people, as we learn in our lives, we put together a story about how life works. We begin to think about it and try to create a whole story about the way things happen. Not that we always do this consciously. I think that we put together this story, this world view, perhaps, this simple way of seeing, and it is our trust in that that enables us to form our decisions and our thoughts.

Now, we know that this trust doesn't always work out. There was a guy who had formed a church. He called it the People's Temple, and had a vision of caring for people that engaged people and brought them in. That's what they thought they were about. And yet, their leader became more paranoid and led them to Guyana, and then actually led them to a mass suicide or mass murder. His name was Jim Jones. Some of us are old enough to remember that tragedy. The story those folks believed and trusted in, had faith in, was betrayed. So, it matters where we put our trust. It can be a life and death decision. The story we trust in can lead us into places and decisions that have life and death consequences.

In our scripture today we hear about the life and death consequences of having faith. In this case it's Stephen, who is one of the first deacons in the church, one of those in charge of the caring ministry, trying to care for the religious leaders of his day by telling them what he thought was true and good, and inviting them to accept it. It was their anger at his telling them something different than what they wanted to hear, them finding what he said untenable, which led to Stephen's death. They stoned him. What we believe/trust has life and death consequences. It matters where we put our trust, what stories we accept, who we are going to believe.

I think that faith is one of those things that we have to decide about. We have to learn to trust in our God and our savior, Jesus. Sometimes we come to that initial trust in what seems like a moment—a conversion. Sometimes we recognize that we begin to engage with Jesus and at some point realize that we have learned to trust, that we have found that he is our savior. In either case, that realization that we trust in him is really a beginning. It is time of starting into our faith. In first Peter, he talks about it as growing into salvation; having tasted and realized the Lord is good. We grow into our salvation, into the healing God gives us, into the grace God gives us, into the life God shows us, and into the way of God.

The story of Stephen, together with today's scripture from 1 Peter, remind us that folks stumble over the Jesus story. While others stumble over this story, we have learned to give our trust to Jesus. Not everyone will accept and trust and grow into salvation. Part of the challenge of growing into our salvation is that not everyone will see it the same way. Our trust in Jesus is a trust in the relationship that God has given us. One of grace. One of goodness, One that has allowed us to hear the story and begin to trust it, and in it to recognize that we're growing into the saving grace of Jesus and coming out of darkness, as it says in first Peter. Out of darkness into his marvelous light. It's a story of receiving mercy. As it becomes our story, as we begin to allow it to shape us, we become God's people. We begin to find our place in the world.

Indeed, I really believe that finding our place in the world is one of the things we really strive for. We strive to find where our identity is, who we are, where we can feel at home, accepted. I think the world gives us stories about what it would take for us to feel like we're OK or successful or at home, that we have found our place in the world. One of the stories it tells us is that if we make a lot of money, then we'll feel like we're OK, that we are successful, that we found our way.

This desire to find our way is real. We can see it in the movies that we watch. In a couple of young people's movies, *Frozen* and *Frozen II*, the story of the two sisters, in both cases, is really about them going through a lot of conflict and struggle to find who they are, where they fit, what's the real story of their lives, and where their home is. Jesus is telling his disciples that they will always have a dwelling place with him, that he goes before them to create a dwelling place for them, and that they will be able to come to him. There is always that sense that we will have a home with Jesus.

In a story like *Frozen II*, they have to work through all this conflict and all these elemental spirits basically throwing tantrums and showing their anger. They struggle to work through that. Jesus tells us a slightly different story about how we might find our way. Indeed, he says, "I am the way and the truth and the life." I think what he's telling us is that if we want to find our way home, if we want to find our place in life, if we want to fit somewhere, where we fit is in the love of God and the grace of God given us. It's where we belong. It is God's love incarnate that has shown us this way, this truth, this life. Indeed, I think he shows us this eternal life. He leads us into this life and helps us grow into salvation.

We may feel out of step with the world. I've already mentioned this. The struggle because everybody is struggling to find their way. People will decide on different stories. It feels like our world stumbles over this story – our way our truth and our life—with Jesus as the one that we follow, the way to go, the one who is the very incarnate love of God because he's describing a way of radical care and love that is often not the way of the world.

The way of the world often tells us we have to fight, we have to compete, we have to make sure that we get our own, that we are in combat with one another. We use the language of war in our arguments. Indeed, it feels like our world today is shattered by greed, dysfunction and lies. It's a place where fear and hate seem to lead to violence and death. We hear too often about people dying because somebody else had decided to kill them. We hear about a black man out jogging, who gets killed in the process. I don't know the ins and outs of that story, yet we hear too often of tragic death and that's only the far end of that way of seeing things. It's the far end of the scale, the outlier.

There are a lot of ways that violence is often used in our world. Fear and hate are expressed. It feels to me that God's story is different. God's story is one of life and life abundantly. God's story is one that offers goodness, grace, and love, instead of incessant conflict, violence and hatred. God's story, God's way, saves. Too many stories destroy or diminish life.

Trusting and believing, having faith in Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life saves us, helps us see through Jesus' eyes, and helps us see our blinders, our own ways we dehumanize others, our prejudices and the way we dismiss the needs of others. It's so easy to simply begin to think about what we need, our own safety, our own concerns. God invites us in his way, in the way of Christ, to see the needs of the world and to even forgive those who might be stoning us. That's an incredible vision of being able to forgive and to care about the other even in the midst of that kind of struggle.

So as God invites us to know we have a place, a home, a way, an identity as the people of God, it is in part through helping us see what we need to shed, what's in the way, the blinders we have, our own flaws and hubris. This can be uncomfortable. Yet, remember, this is not meant to diminish us but to lead us into being the people of God, to extend the very grace of God to a world that is so in need. Trusting in Jesus is not about how terrible we are. but how much better we can be. How we can be healed. How we can find our home. How we can be in a dwelling place and grow into salvation and be good for our world, for our neighbor, for each other, and for God.

God's grace is amazing and will lead us to amazing places. A place of goodness, of peace, of grace. The challenge that is given us is to trust that that is where God is leading us if we will follow in spite of the world around us. We are invited to trust in the story that we experience with Jesus, and in trusting it, let it shape our lives, shape what we think, and shape the contours of our hearts, so that we become the people of God, who are good for the world and for each other, and do the very will of God. Amen.