

Text: *Hebrews 11:1* Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Colossians 2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Luke 12:35 Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.

THE FAITH THEIVES

I have always envied those people who were absolutely sure and confident in their faith. As for me, I have always had to deal with faith mice nibbling around the edges of my crust of belief. Those faith mice were fed by my mother when I was about four years old and was required to memorize what is probably the absolutely worse evening prayer ever written: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. But if I should die before I wake, I pray my soul the Lord to take. "I immediately, but silently, added a codicil to the prayer."But God, I don't want to die so keep me alive."

My faith has matured a good bit since I was four – although I still cross my fingers once in a while. I find that personal faith has several varieties of faith mice that still rob people of the peace, serenity and motivation that we all need. It seems to me that there are four areas where the faith mice have probably turned into faith rats for some of us, if only occasionally.

Personal hardship is the first faith thief with which most of us deal at some point in our lives. It may be a personal illness or accident. It might be the illness or death of a loved one. Sometimes it is something a bit more mundane: Financial problems, job prospects, inter-personal relationships. In all instances, if the issue is a problem – the temptation is to blame God. God, why do you let good people suffer? God, why didn't you make sure that I got that job? God, why is my healing so slow?

In all of these instances our faith is looking for a magical experience: A performance featuring God, on stage, doing magic tricks. Sometimes we try to get God to perform tricks for us through bribery. God, if I get that job I will make a really big contribution to the church. Europe is littered with chapels and even a few cathedrals that bear testimony to some king who really needed God's help with killing a big bunch of people in a war. One wonders about how many prayers are calls for God's magic, instead of God's love? When hardship, real or perceived, causes us to question our faith, we probably are looking for magic to explain phenomena that are both spiritual and of this world. God does not cause disasters, illness, poverty or death. God will grant us strength, through love, to deal with disaster and hardship, but God does not cause them. We can keep the thief from stealing our faith by looking for love, not magic, from God. Prayers are answered, although not always in the ways we might wish. Remember when Jesus was facing his death he prayed "God, take this cup from me; but your will, not mine be done. That is what strengthens faith.

If you are happy with the way the world works, you obviously have not been paying attention. **The condition of the world around us** is another faith thief. The faith destroying question is "why does God allow". . .fill in the blank with your own pet concern. War, environmental disasters, famine, school place murders. The answer is: God does not allow. Human-kind has free will. Love cannot be coerced.

It must be freely given and freely received. The presence of disasters, both natural and human made, does not indicate an absence of God. It indicates chance and human caused behavior. We cannot eliminate chance, although we can mitigate chances' effects. We can reduce human caused disastrous behavior in many different ways. In some instances the application of technology and human ingenuity will suffice. Other circumstances call for the reduction of hate and the spread of love. Just imagine a world in which nations spent as much money on peace as they do on war. Our faith tells us that the difficult is possible. We can draw upon the moral strength of our belief in God to bring about loving change. The environmental slogan, "think globally, act locally", is a good place to start. Perhaps I cannot change the world, but I can change my own behavior by adding a measure of love to all of my actions. This builds and enriches faith. Our faith can build a better world.

Our third faith thief got its' start in the late middle ages and the time of enlightenment. We commonly call that thief **science and technology**. Whether it was Copernicus demonstrating that the earth is not the center of the universe or the Webb telescope probing the earliest time after the big bang, humans have maintained that the death of God was being forced upon the faithful. We know that the death of God was never forced on the faithful, only on the stupid. Whether one is a 15th century pope or a 21st century biblical literalist there are always some who have created a god in their own image and have decided to worship what I call the incredible shrink-wrapped god. God is larger than your imagination, greater than poetry, grander than nature's wonders. When you look at the billion years old light captured by the Webb telescope, you begin to glimpse God's grandeur. God is large enough to contain science – God is not destroyed, nor should our faith be troubled, by the advances of science and technology. Indeed, they are causes for us to praise God.

The fourth great robber of our faith has been described by Paul as **"hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."** Faith destroying philosophies change over time. Today the Episcopal Church is particularly concerned about two: Biblical inerrancy and Christian nationalism. To believe that the Bible is without error and internal contradictions moves one dangerously close to worshipping the Bible instead of God. It also drives people away from Christianity itself. The Old Testament was written by many tribal men who were trying to understand the relationship of themselves and their tribe to the infinite. They were, to the best of their ability, trying to know their place in the universe. Like all primitive people they used myths, stories and natural phenomena to help them grasp the mystery of their existence. To use the OT as a literal textbook of early life and faith is to miss its' essential point: To develop knowledge of the relationship of human-kind to God. Inerrancy drives people away from belief and faith. Unfortunately, young people tend to throw out the baby of faith with the bathwater of inerrancy.

Christian nationalism is the revival of the Holy Roman Empire, only exchanging the President for the Pope. It is a hollow and deceptive philosophy that has the potential to gravely damage both Church and State. Pluralism is the great strength of the United States. The lynchpin of that pluralism is the separation of church and state. Freedom of and from religion has allowed us to make "one out of many." The destruction of the secular state is the destruction of our democracy. It would also be the destruction of Christianity which would simply become a tool of the state to maintain control over its'

citizens. We all need to resist these philosophies and speak out against them wherever we may find them.

Those of us who want a strong faith, one that can resist the thieves that seek to rob us of belief, would do well to heed Paul's words from Colossians. "Be dressed for action and have your lamp lit."

Amen.