

Mark Moline

Sermon July 1st, 2018

“Your faith has made you well....go in peace.”

We Christian believers are a people called to faith. Primarily we are called to faith in Christ. But that crucial first faith leads us to a faith that takes on many different forms. We live our lives in faith looking forward to that promise – that City built by God. We are on a faith pilgrimage here, but we are called to be more than mere travelers; we are not just passing through. We are called to stay here for a time of love of - and a time of service to others. We are called to faith for the journey itself as well as faith in that promised destination.

We are called to faith through Christ in self, faith in family, faith in friends, faith in community, and especially during this week’s celebration of our nation’s 242nd birthday, we are indeed called to faith in our blessed homeland.

Now, I know that Jesus was not a good red-blooded American. He was not one of our nation’s founding fathers. I do not equate Christianity to national patriotism. Jesus didn’t teach democratic majority rule, I don’t recall any scripture passage about him ever taking a vote from among his followers. But he was a champion of freedom. He did say I am the truth and the truth will set you free. Neither democracy nor Christianity preclude one another primarily because both concepts rely upon FAITH!

Amid all the division and polarization of the Viet Nam War era, President Lyndon Johnson ended his 1965 State of the Union Address with this absolutely phenomenal statement, “This, then, is the state of the union: free and restless, growing and full of hope. So it was in the beginning (of our nation). So it shall always be, while God is willing, and we are strong enough to keep the faith.”

In one sentence, President Johnson correlates our faith in our nation with its strength and vitality, and then subjects all three concepts to the will of almighty God. He equates national strength to personal faith in the nation and in God, and his words echo down to us today as a warning to remain strong in faith in our nation, amidst all of the present-day divisiveness.

A few years back, I was becoming quite skeptical about the future of this great nation. I was winding down my service as Rector of St. Luke’s in Prescott, Arizona and my spiritual faith in God had never been stronger. But my faith in America was beginning to pale as our freedoms seemed to be slowly and steadily eroding. It just seemed to me like we were losing our country – and no one seemed to care.

~~~Then something happened to change all of that. Five years ago – yesterday – June 30<sup>th</sup> 2013, it was a Sunday, and after services that morning Linda and Ginny invited Judy and me to their place for dinner that evening. Linda grew up in Mississippi down on the gulf. So when they invite you for beans and rice you know you are in for a real treat. But our lovely dinner was interrupted though by one of Arizona’s bizarre lightening storms. And

then Ginny's Mom (another of our parishioners) called and asked if we had the local news turned on.

We turned on the radio and heard that the lightning had generated a wildfire on the side of Yarnell Hill. Yarnell Hill is no hill, it is a treacherous and steep desert mountain even without the fire. We listened as the fire died down enough for the rescuers to make their way toward the very inaccessible site where Prescott's own nationally certified "Granite Mountain Hotshots", wildfire fighters were last seen in their effort to control the blaze.

Then we heard the announcer say that all nineteen of the "Hotshots" who went down the hill had been killed by the flames. Nineteen lost.

Months later the official U.S. Department of Forestry report found that two rapidly reoccurring 90\* wind changes had trapped the crew in a spot that had reached better than 2000°F. That report said that such was unsurvivable.

Nineteen young men, most in their early twenties made the ultimate sacrifice for the safety of their community. That tragic incident gave me pause to look around and think. I found I was surrounded by young soldiers, police officers, nurses, health care workers, young priests and young school teachers, even young construction workers and sales clerks and on and on. I found I was surrounded by our children who have grown to have their own faith in this great nation of ours. Young folks who loved this nation ever bit as much as I did.

It was then that I realized I had fallen into a common trap of the aging process. When it comes to faith in God and eternity I focus my faith upon the future. But when it comes to faith in our freedom, I focus solely upon our history.

This Fourth of July let us rejoice in the faith of our children as much as we do in the faith of our fathers. It was President Franklin Pierce who said, "I can express no better hope for my country than that the kind providence which smiled upon our fathers may enable their children to preserve the blessings they have inherited."