

This past week, one of the Vision and Discernment groups met at Cedarfield in the chapel. It was our second meeting; we have four to go. Shirley Wilson wondered with me, "What would it be if Jesus just showed up at our front door? Have you ever imagined what it would be like if Jesus came to our homes?" Her wondering was a gift. Let's follow her suggestion. We are getting ready to go to work. We are standing in the kitchen drinking a last sip of coffee and someone who looks like Jesus shows up at the back door. We are driving to Kroger and someone with long hair and a clean beige robe comes up to speak to us, would we be afraid? Would we call Security or run away? Midway through the afternoon of a busy work day, you have one final project and someone comes to you and says, "There is a man out here named Jesus and he is asking for ten minutes of your time. Can you see him right now?" I want to think with you for a moment about our experience of faith and consider what our readings are suggesting.

My answer for Shirley was that Jesus has shown up at our front doors. We have invited him in. He has been among us as we have gathered in the church. As we have met as committees and prayed, as we have gone out in faith and compassion to do something for others, as we have gathered around word and sacrament, Jesus has been among us. Hasn't he?

We pray when our family members bow their heads, "Come, Lord Jesus, our guest to be and bless these gifts bestowed by Thee." Do we ever look back on our mealtime and believe Jesus was present?

We say on Sunday mornings, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord."

We give from bank accounts we have set up to live; we give to the ministry of the church.

We come to worship with personal needs and issues and diagnoses; we join other friends and members and together we work together on helping others. We work on these buildings. We worship by hearing the word shared. We receive from this table bread and cup; we remember Jesus died for the sin of the world and rose to encourage us to love God and neighbor as we love ourselves.

We gather with others around this small booklet of scripture readings. We pray. Do we ever consider that Jesus is present with us? Do we ever experience his being present? Do we ever realize God is with us?

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews is one of the greatest pastors in the New Testament. He cares about the church with a devotion and depth not seen in others. He presents Jesus as the Great High Priest. He speaks of the perils of falling away from Christ. He explains the sacrifice of Jesus Christ once for all. He calls the church to persevere. **"Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."** (Hebrews 10:23) Perhaps, he is aware the church is losing a bit of its grip on God and faith and all that matters. At the end of the first century, people are looking for Jesus. They are asking, "Where is the promise of his coming?" People are getting tired. The Hebrews writer/pastor says, **"But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved."** (Hebrews 10:39)

He explains faith this way. He says it is assurance and conviction. Faith is the experience of being reminded of realities for which we hope. Faith is the belief of things we cannot see. He reminds us by faith, our ancestors were approved by God. By faith, we have come to believe **"the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."** (Hebrews 11:3)

By faith, Abraham obeyed God's call to leave his home and travel to a land God would give his people. We have done this too in different ways. We have left our homes and done what we believed God was telling us to do.

By faith, Abraham spent many years waiting. We know what waiting means. We have heard God's call and we have put ourselves in places we might not have gone apart from God. We are waiting now.

By faith, God gave Abraham the ability to do something he could never have done without God. God gave Abraham the ability to procreate. God promised Abram that his ancestors would be as many as the grains of sand on the beach. I suppose he thought that a clever idea. When Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac, he believed God and began to see this promise and plan unfolding by faith.

By faith, we are a church. By faith, we have created a way of life here together for ourselves and our children. By faith, we worship and read and study and give to others. By faith, we continue to think about our identity and our purpose and our future so that we may live lives full of God's power and presence for the sake of others knowing this too. The one who writes this letter encourages the church to move beyond "hope so" to discover the assurance of God, the conviction of unseen realities.

The writer of the gospel of Luke is explaining Jesus to someone who wants to know. This morning we read a passage we often read in December. While we are tempted to worry about our futures, Luke remembers where our treasures are is where our focus and attention will always be.

Luke says to be ready for this Jesus. He believes it is a good idea to wonder what it would be like for Jesus to show up at our front door. Luke says we are to live in expectation. Luke says we do not know when we will see him. We are to be like those who have been given responsibilities and we are waiting for the One who gave us the job in the first place. And while we are waiting, we are to be careful about those things we are collecting. He tells us to sell them and give money to people who need help. While we are waiting, we should focus on things that matter. We are to collect treasures that never wear out.

Some people wait for the worst to happen. Some people wait to die. Some wait for the Lord who loves them, the Lord of all creation, the Lord who gave his life for them, the Lord who keeps showing up. Some wait for this One. This is the one for whom we are waiting.

Just now we are in a time in the life of the church when people are making choices. One United Church of Christ pastor believes the old way of doing church is about duty and responsibility. One old way of doing things is in doing what we do and forgetting why we do them. One old way of doing things is in doing what we do simply because we have done it this way before. Tony Robinson believes the church's purpose is transformation. He says when people experience God's grace in studying the scriptures, in lively worship and in ministry with trusted brothers and sisters, they begin to change. This kind of change is the kind for which people are hungry.

I can give a personal testimony about change. I am a different person than I was twelve years ago. I came here naïve in many ways and the church has been part of God's shaping me and helping me to understand my gifts better. Sometimes this is hard...like a surgeon's knife. Other times there is great joy. God is at work in all of us really.

I have asked people the question, "Do you know God loves you? Do you know Jesus died for you? Do you know God is at work in the world today?" The answer I sometimes get is, "I hope so." What these verses speak of is not "hope so." This is the beginning of faith. We read this morning "faith is *the assurance* of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith is moving beyond "hope so" because something or someone reaffirms this hope in our souls enough so that we can act. Faith is the conviction, a trust in unseen realities.

So...this is what we are to do now.

When we pray and shut ourselves in to be alone, remember Jesus at the door.

When someone presents herself and her need, remember Jesus at the door and we try our best to help in appropriate ways.

When we recall the hurt someone has done to us, remember Jesus' words, "**Love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**" (John 13:35) Remember Jesus at the door. Jesus is at the door of our minds and hearts and lives always. He enjoys coming into our

imaginations and minds to teach and forgive and prepare us for great service in places where no one has ever gone before.