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Salvation by Faith Alone **Romans 3:21-26, 28-30**
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, MD

“If I knew that the world would end tomorrow, today I would plant an apple tree”. – That is my favorite Martin Luther quote.

In a time of crises unleashed in east and west, north and south- from hurricanes, earthquakes, mass shootings and wildfires, on what can we ultimately rely? What is faith all about, anyway?

There is a faith built into our system as human beings...part resiliency, part hopefulness, part stubborn fortitude, that has us, when we're at our best, head in a good direction in life. Faith is a gift that guides us in ways deeper than we know.

For starters today, here's a slightly different way to begin to think about the gift of faith. One of my old high school classmates is an airline pilot. He's flown for Delta Airlines for years now... the last five years on the Minneapolis to Tokyo route, about a 13 hour flight. He's always been into aeronautics, as much as I've been into matters of faith, I guess.

I remember a conversation we had at our last class gathering, about the Concorde, the supersonic jetliner that once flew between New York and Paris. (This was about 20 years ago now, before the company went bankrupt.) He happened to be obsessed with the navigational system of the plane and was once given a VIP tour that we had an interesting conversation about.

The Concorde flew at Mach 2, 1,350 mph. One could cross the Atlantic in under four hours. It was the fastest commercial airline, ever. In his tour of the cockpit area of the plane, he was slightly surprised to discover that no one actually kept the plane on course. Because of the phenomenal speed of the plane and the relative slowness of human reaction time, the course was tracked and maintained by two computers. The first took a course reading every few seconds and, if the plane was off course, instantaneously fed this data to the second onboard computer which would make the needed correction and confirm the new course. It worked flawlessly.

After a review of this system, he was impressed, but still had a question... something had caught his attention and he was unsure exactly what it was. He pondered in his mind what it was that was unusual. He asked if he could go back to the cockpit for one last quick visit. Once there, he realized that it wasn't something that he had seen but something he had heard. As the computers fed course readings and corrections back and forth, they made a distinctive sound, a

kind of clicking. What he noticed was that the sound was almost continuous. He had to ask the tour guide what percentage of the time the plane was off course. The response was striking, about 99% of the time.

"And the plane will still arrive on time?" my friend asked. "Yes, sir," the guide replied, "plus or minus sixty seconds or so."

Now I remember my friend telling me this. He is a pilot and I take it to be true; and the point of all of this raises an interesting thought. Perhaps it's not just a slow reaction time that would cause problems if the course were to be tracked by humans. There would likely be a certain amount of doubt, over-analysis and friction applied to the process if it were run manually, back and forth between two people. It's not hard to imagine one pilot telling another that he was wrong every few seconds and getting the defensive response "No, I'm not." You would miss Paris by many miles. You might even miss Europe.

Even more important, a human being, being wrong 99 percent of the time, might even lose heart. - This is all to say that in this case it was appropriate and necessary to place one's faith, and life- to the system created for this specific purpose: to cede control in order to reach the desired destination.

Real live faith is something like that. We place our faith in God to take us where we need to go.

The Presbyterian Pastor & author Frederick Buechner has mused that "Faith is better understood as a verb than a noun, as a process than a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once and for all. Faith is not being completely sure where you are going, but going anyway. It is a journey without maps" (or google maps!). (Wishful Thinking, 1973.

Another restatement of this, by the theologian Paul Tillich, came in his famous sermon, "You are Accepted." "Just accept the fact that you are accepted; accepted by a power that is greater than you."

Now, the reason I'm talking about this in the first place is that this idea of faith was a linchpin of the Reformation, spurred on by Martin Luther; a movement in which the Presbyterian Church is rooted. It is a core belief and conviction, a point of reference and a guide for taking stock of our lives. It is not so much a crutch as a path to follow, open to more variations than you would expect.

"By faith alone" is at the same time a doctrine that says that there is nothing you can 'do'- or have to do, in order to be saved, and that this is what God says to us and brings to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

After wading through all the "Church talk"- the theological jargon and mumbo jumbo that this might sound like to you, I want to offer another twist to this.

I know that for many, their faith journey was not so much a leap of faith, but began with a hard journey **away from** faith. When you are raised with belief, it is not unusual to come to doubt much of what you have been taught.

At whatever age you may be: eleven, twenty-one or sixty one, your sure and certain view that God is in heaven and all is right with the world can indeed be shaken. Everything that was once certain can come to seem foolish and empty. It doesn't have to take a calamity to do this... For some it's what you read, for others its a life changing experience, or even just taking a really hard look at the ways of the world which can bring more questions than answers, more often than not.

Losing faith is not a discovery that a proposition once believed has been proved to be false. Faith is where we stand in the universe, not an idea that is checked off in the truth-or-illusion column. Losing one's faith is stepping off the planet to find oneself spinning in a new orbit.

According to Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and spiritual guide, sooner or later, if you are on any 'classic spiritual schedule' you will stumble over a necessary stumbling stone; you will 'lose' in life, if only to learn that is part of what life is all about. It seems that, at least spiritually, we do not really find something until we first lose it, ignore it, miss it, long for it, choose it and personally find it again- but now on a new level. And all of that process is part of faith.

According to Martin Luther, who began overturning this boulder of a conundrum way back in 1517; all of faith is entirely the work of God. Faith, for Luther, is a gift from God, "...a living, bold trust in God's love, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it... Faith is an instrument that **receives** the gift of salvation, not something that **causes** salvation."

There is a faith built into our system as human beings; into our guidance systems, as it were. Sometimes we go off course, even despite our best intentions, and faith goes silent for a time. Believe it or not- that is also part of the faith journey- (the worst case scenario being the Dark Night of the Soul- which I guess could be an Adult Seminar offering sometime.)

Interestingly, the Hebrew scholar and translator Robert Alter says that the Lord of the ancient

Jewish scriptures always shows jealousy over idolaters, but patience with atheists, such as they were. That is to say, turning from God to a substitute God, whatever that may be, is worse, much worse than enduring doubt, trials and a dearth of satisfactory answers. Waiting for an answer from God, hopefully, or even without hope, is far better than deciding to satisfy yourself with cheap substitutes. That might not be what you want to hear- but so it is. (No one said that faith was easy, did they?)

On the other hand, none of us stands alone in our faith, neither now- nor for eternity. Baptized in Christ, we are all part of the same body. We are all part of God's creation, infinitely wonderful, complex and interrelated- deeper than we know. Faith is knowing that Jesus' love for us is now and eternal- and embodied in those who still follow him- even you & me.

This I know for sure, that nothing in life or in death, on earth or in heaven can separate us from Jesus' love, and I'm glad I have good company on this journey.

“If I knew that the world would end tomorrow, today I would plant an apple tree”.

To be part of a body of faith in Christ — especially here at Second Presbyterian - makes all the difference in the world for me— how about you?

Amen.