

## BURN THE BOATS BEHIND YOU

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King City United Church  
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Two millennia ago, the eagle of the royal standard of Rome cast its shadow over much of the known world. Brave soldiers of Caesar sallied forth from that town on the Tiber River to conquer lands to the edge of the earth. When they reached the shores of England, thousands of fearless Englishmen massed on the cliffs ready to fight to protect their homeland. But as the defenders watched the legions disembark, they beheld a frightening sight. The Roman soldiers pulled their boats up on shore and burned them. There was nowhere to go except forward. The line of retreat and last resort was gone. They had such faith in themselves how could they do anything else but conquer their foes?

This is the faith that God calls us to have, a faith that is so confident that it burns the boats behind it, a faith that looks only forward trusting that victory is at hand.

This is the faith of Abram and Sarai, later to be renamed Abraham and Sarah. God told them to leave everything behind, their country, their kindred, their family home, and to go forward where God would lead them. There, even though they were old, God would bless them and make them parents of a great nation. They believed God and went where God told them. They had faith that burned the boats behind them.

This is the faith of Jesus. In this morning's Gospel lesson, he is told that King Herod is after him to kill him. Jesus replies that they can tell that fox that he will go on and continue to do that for which he was born, for which he was commissioned and empowered by baptism, regardless of what Herod might threaten. Jesus is ready to face all that threatens him, even death. He goes on with a faith that burns the boats behind him.

This is also the faith of Paul. Zealous Saul of Tarsus persecuted Christians, but on the road to Damascus, he was confronted by the Risen Christ. The faith that grew out of that experience was a faith that burns the boats behind him. He left his old life behind. He left even his name behind, and Saul became Paul. Already the power of Christ was at work within him changing him, changing his life and enabling him to become like Christ.

It is to this faith that we are called, a faith that leaves behind earthly things and pushes forward joyfully, peacefully and courageously, a faith that burns the boats behind us, a faith that can do nothing else but be victorious over all that confronts us.

But how can we have such a faith? It doesn't seem very practical. After all, don't we like to hedge our bets? Don't we like to make sure that there is a way out, a back door, some method of escape? Questions and doubts immediately enter our minds.

William Willimon is currently a professor at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. He relates a story about a girl named Anne who attended a church he

once served. Anne was a student at pharmacy school. One day her father phoned Willimon to say that she had dropped out of school. "Really," Willimon exclaimed. "What on earth is leading her to do a thing like that?"

"Well, we're not sure, preacher," he said. "You know how much Anne likes you. We thought you could call her up and talk some sense into her."

Well, Willimon called her, and he tried to make her see the error of her ways. "How in the world did you come to this decision?" he asked.

You know what it was? His Sunday sermon. In his sermon, he said that God has something important for each of us to do, in our own way. She took that message seriously. She looked at herself and her life, and determined that she was in pharmacy for the wrong reason, only for the money and for earthly things, but not for God. So she quit, and she decided to go back to a job she had held one summer teaching poor migrant children to read. She burned the boats behind her.

There was a long silence. Then Willimon said, "Look, Anne, I was just preaching." How hard it is even for preachers, maybe especially for preachers, to have a faith that burns the boats behind them. We too have our doubts.

But the faith of our forebearers, Abram and Sarai, is practical. It involves life. It leads somewhere. It has a purpose behind it. It makes a difference.

Sometimes people say that faith is merely an opiate, a tranquilizer to deaden the pain, a crutch to lean on. It is true that faith can assuage even the deepest wounds, but faith is an opiate only in the sense that it makes us dream. It urges us to new heights, to explore new lands, to seek new adventures in living. Rather than a crutch, faith is a tool through which we can fashion life, but like any tool, it grows rusty if not used. It loses its cutting edge.

Dr. Ernest Campbell was one of the great preachers who follow Harry Emerson Fosdick at the Riverside Church in New York. One summer he had some lengthy discussions with a young man about his plans. The man's father had been an able preacher in the southern states, and he had toyed with the idea of becoming a preacher himself. "Still," he said to Campbell, "I'm not sure that I believe." Campbell responded with a question, "What would you do with more faith now if you had it?" What he was saying is that this man was comfortable. He had few wants and fewer needs. What did he need faith for? There is a kind of economy with God regarding faith. God never gives more than you need. If you never risk, if you never reach for something beyond yourself, if you never try anything that is difficult or scary, what do you need faith for? It shouldn't surprise you that your faith is minimal. Like an unused muscle, it has atrophied. It needs exercise to grow. Faith is practical, but like a perishable quantity, it loses its life if it is stored away. When a rainy day comes there is none left.

Faith has two aspects, gift and grasp. Faith is a gift from God that we must grasp. In the sense of grasp, it's like a muscle that needs exercise. In the sense of gift, it's like adrenalin. It spurs us to action.

Abram and Sarai had that kind of faith. They were old but their faith was ready for action. When God called they stepped out in a faith which was prepared to leave everything behind and to give its all to do the will of God. But even for them there were questions and doubts. In this morning's reading, they had already been led from Ur of the Chaldeans, their home, to the land that God had promised to them. Still they had questions. How are they to know that they will inherit this land?

Our grasping is always tentative. Faith is mixed with doubt, but doubt is not a sign of the absence of faith. Rather it is the growing edge of faith. It is a sign of a healthy, growing faith. Doubts are the growing pains that signal advance.

Do you remember when you first learned to ride a bicycle? Perhaps you used training wheels for a while to gain a little confidence. My father didn't believe in training wheels. Instead, at first, he rode around with us on the crossbar so that we could see how much fun it was, and simply that it was possible. Then he put us on the seat and pushed the bike while running alongside. What fun it was to be almost riding by ourselves with Dad to catch us if we should fall. They came the time Dad asked whether he could let go. He assured us that we weren't going to fall, but we were frightened. We doubted. Some of us said, "No," at least that first day. Finally, though we said, "Yes," and Dad let go. What a marvelous experience that was!

My brother Paul crashed the bike into a concrete parking pillar and split the frame, but that didn't matter. Doubt had become faith. Certainly, accidents would happen from time to time, but we would never fear falling again. Now we were ready to move on to greater challenges.

That is the way faith is. It is a flux between certainty and doubt. Our grasp is tentative, but faith is an ever-growing thing increasing in strength and daring with each passing day.

However, though our grasp is tentative, God's gift is not. God's gift of faith is never in doubt. Victory is assured. The resurrection of Christ shows us that God never fails, even when we do, even when we resist, even when we rebel. Even when we refuse to believe in God, God never ceases to believe in us.

Our faith is not based in carefully reasoned arguments or clever propositions, but is grounded on a person, the person of Christ who reveals God. Our faith is not something new or novel. Our faith is old. Our faith is tried. Our faith is tested. Our faith is never found wanting. It is found to be true.

Bishop Desmond Tutu once visited Duke University to speak in the University Chapel where William Willimon was chaplain. Two thousand people gathered in the chapel. Another 1500 assembled in the overflow auditorium. There were great expectations. The press were hoping for a good story. "We hope he has something new to say. Most of what he has been saying, he has said before."

Bishop Tutu was late, but because the service was televised, they had to begin on time and shuffle the order. When he finally arrived and jogged up the aisle in his

bright purple shirt and clerical collar, people stood on their chairs. Some cheered; some wept.

Then entering the pulpit Tutu began by saying, "I am beginning to sound like an old record whose needle has become stuck." Then he preached about the old story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. He gently ridiculed the contemporary prophets of Baal who expect their idols to save them. "These rulers are going to try to stand against the almighty love of God? Hah!" Tutu laughed.

Nations, oppressive regimes and unjust rulers had better take care. Faith subverts injustice by convincing an old woman in Soweto that she is a beloved child of a loving and just God. No earthly power can long withstand this assault by those who have a faith that burns the boats behind them in the knowledge that they are loved and empowered by God.

As Bishop Tutu said, he didn't have anything new to say. All that he said was old, but from an ancient story comes power to fight the earthly powers that oppress. Our faith is old and tried. It is practical. It has changed and transformed people into those who embody the faith they profess. It works.

Each one of us must try the faith and see for ourselves that it is true. There comes the day, or rather many days, when we must risk, when we must burn the boats behind us and go on to those other places and other things to which God calls us. We must grasp the gift of God.

Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy was an English Anglican priest and poet, and a decorated chaplain from the Western Front of the First World War. He puts it this way.

How do I know that God is good? I don't.  
I gamble like a man. I bet my life  
Upon one side in life's great war. I must,  
I can't stand out. I must take sides. The man  
Who is neutral in this fight is not  
A man. He's bulk and body without breath,  
Cold leg of lamb without mint sauce. A fool.  
He makes me sick. Good Lord! Weak tea! Cold slops!  
I want to live, live out, not wobble through  
My life somehow, and then into the dark.

The legions of Rome invading Britain bet their lives upon their side in life's great war. We must take sides.

Burn the boat behind you. Bet your life on Christ. You can depend upon him.  
Amen.