

## **Like A Tree with Deep Roots**

- 1 Kings 19:1-18 -

### **Stories of People that make up the church!**

It has been only a week since I have come to Asbury UMC but I have learned many important things such as how to turn on the lights in the sanctuary. Last Sunday, I came to church around 8:30 a.m. and tried to turn on the lights. But I could not find the light switch. About 8:45, Linda came to prepare the communion table so I asked her where the light switch was. Linda told me. "I am sorry but I don't know. I have been here at this church only 25 years." I assumed that the location of the light switch must be highly confidential information only for really old-timers. But Dick generously shared that top secret with me so now I can turn on the lights in the sanctuary.

Another thing I did over the past week was to learn about the history of Asbury UMC. I was surprised by its long and rich history. Do you know that our church will be 90 years old next year? Diane heard that I was seeking information regarding the history of the church and brought me old church pictorial directories and the 75<sup>th</sup> church anniversary memory book. I especially enjoyed reading the anniversary memory book because it includes beautiful stories of grace and love you have shared with God and one another. Also, I could learn more about you and Asbury UMC. I learned a little bit about Frank and Deb's love story. Frank proposed to Deb on a gondola on top of Loon Mountain. I also learned how Carl Bishop became a church member a long time ago. It was not through inspirational preaching but through playing basketball at the church. I guess that I must work hard! Reading your stories and memories at Asbury reminds me that the church is not a building but people who make up the church. Our church was built, and has been serving for almost a century because of many people's prayers, generosity, and love for God and love for each other. I thank you all for taking responsibility for the church and most of all, your deep love for this beautiful church.

At the same time, I feel a kind of pressure about how to pass on our great spiritual legacy and heritage to our next generation. When a pastor is appointed to a new church, the pastor receives the church profile. In the church profile of Asbury, all the answers to the questionnaire were written in lowercase letters except for one question. That question was "What do you need a pastor to do with you?" The answer to this question was "Help us grow" and it was written in all capital letters. I could instantly sense the challenge Asbury is now facing. Since July 1<sup>st</sup>, for the first time, Asbury has become a part-time church and I bet that this new situation may stir up a sense of loss, anxiety and fear within our congregation. Young people are leaving the church and the numbers of church attendance are declining. This is a huge challenge for the entire UMC today. The membership of the UMC declines about 1 to 3 % each year. This worsening situation seems to be an unconquerable challenge for us.

Do you believe that our beloved Asbury can grow again? Do you believe that our church would be filled with the joyful noise of kids and youth again? Yes. We do! Our church already has the power and the resources to overcome all these challenges from the spiritual draught of secular society. The question is “where do we start?” This is what I would like to share with you for next a couple of weeks.

### **Fear, Trembling and Despair**

We often describe the life of faith as a journey. Sometimes, our faith journey seems to be on the straight highway towards God, feeling God’s guidance and presence at every turn of our life. But, sometimes, we feel that we’ve lost our way to God, as if we were left alone on a strange planet. Our spiritual journey swings up and down. Even saints and great spiritual leaders sometimes flop down to the ground. You must know Mother Teresa, who devoted her entire life to God and the poor on the streets of Calcutta, India. Can you believe that she wrote a letter, questioning whether or not God really exists? John Wesley, an exceptional preacher and a great spiritual leader, seriously considered quitting preaching because of his faithlessness. Even Elijah, who is deemed as one of the greatest prophets in Israel, is almost to the ground in today’s text. Elijah was frightened, anxious, depressed, fled like a coward and ultimately asked God to take his life away.

In fact, he won the great battle against the eight hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and Asherah at Mount Carmel. He had tasted the sweet moment of victory and witnessed the mighty power of our God. However, right after this great moment of victory, Elijah falls down to the ground when the queen, Jezebel, threatens to kill him. He seems to learn nothing from his mountain top experience and seems faithless. When the queen’s words of revenge reach him, Elijah is afraid and flees for his life. He runs away almost one hundred seventy miles, which is the distance from Warwick to New York City. But Elijah is still anxious as if the queen’s soldiers will soon hunt him down. So he goes a day’s journey into the wilderness, enduring unbearable heat from the sun and the danger of wild animals. After walking all day long, an exhausted Elijah in despair sits down under the broom tree, asking God to take his life away. He cries out “it is enough; I obeyed all your words and did everything you told me to do. But nothing has been changed. Ahab is still king of Israel and Jezebel is mad at me. Your people still have forsaken your covenant, and destroyed your altars. All my efforts seem useless. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Elijah lays down under the broom tree and falls asleep as if he will not see the dawning of another day.

What we find in the text is not a great prophet nor a spiritual leader of faith. Rather, we see a broken and exhausted man just like us, losing faith and hope in fear and trembling under challenging situations. No Christians and no churches are immune from anxiety and troubles of our daily lives. Tragic accidents can hit our lives at any time. Christians can get sick and lose beloved family members by accidents. Faithful Christians

can lose their job without notice, just like anyone else. Faithful churches can still decline in membership and can be trapped in financial difficulties. No matter how earnest and sincere we are in praying and following God's words, we cannot avoid all challenges and misfortunes of life.

### **Grace and the memory of the Mount Horeb: The past is springboard to tomorrow.**

If your faith is shaken in the face of anxiety and troubles from hopeless situations, it is o.k. Do not blame yourself for shaken faith or losing your hope in God's words. This is the ordinary reaction of most people. Even Elijah experienced the same emotions. All his hope in God's words seemed to shatter when he refused to live.

However, hope remains and faith is still alive even in the depths of despair. But, this hope and faith are not ours. Rather **it is God's faith and hope in us**. Although our faith in God is shaken and we can even abandon our hope in God's words, God never... never gives up on us, as God did not abandon Elijah. Although Elijah gave up his hope, God did not give up God's hope and faith in Elijah. Instead of blaming Elijah's faithlessness, God sent angels to strengthen Elijah with food and water while keeping him safe as he defenselessly slept in the wilderness. This is the grace of God, who 'will not break a bruised reed and will not quench a dimly burning wick.' (Isaiah 42:3)

After strengthening him, God shows Elijah where to go when he had completely lost his direction and vocation. God leads him to mount Horeb. Mount Horeb is the mount of God where God made a covenant with the Israelites. Mount Horeb is the root of the Israelites. Thus, God calls Elijah to the very root of his faith and the very memory of his origin. And there, at mount Horeb where all memories of Elijah's ancestors remain, God meets Elijah and gives him a new vocation, restoring his faith and hope. There is no faith without memory. Our good memory can be a springboard to tomorrow.

### **Journey to the root of our memory of faith**

If your faith is beaten down, return to the root of your faith where you can meet God again and find a new vocation. I know that declining membership and the lack of money seem like a big challenge, but don't let dwindling finances frighten you. Instead of seeking practical solutions, return to the root of your faith. Remember the times when God first touched your heart. Remember the deep historical roots and spiritual legacy of Asbury UMC. Like a tree with deep roots, these historical and spiritual roots will overcome the spiritual draught of our secular society. Our personal and collective memories of God will help us to keep our faith, even when God seems far away.

I am a pastor's kid so I have never experienced any trouble believing in God. I was born a Christian and no one ever persecuted me for my belief so I unconsciously thought my Christian faith was a costless, free gift. After my father passed away in 2009 through an accident, from my aunt, I have heard my father's story of how he began his faith journey. My paternal grandfather was a rigid Confucianist so when he knew my

father became a Christian, he persecuted my father for believing in the ‘western-ghost.’ Whenever he found out my father went to a church, he physically punished him. One day, my father was so severely battered that my aunt worried that my father would die. On that night, my aunt saw my father wake up in the middle of the night and silently leave the house. She was concerned something bad may happen to my father so she followed him. What she saw was my father in the church, wailing and praying to God for my grandfather to be saved all night long. That was the first time I heard about how my father paid for my faith with his tears and blood. This story reminds me how costly and precious my faith is and helps me to firmly hold my faith whenever my faith is shaken in the face of seemingly hopeless situations.

But our root of faith does not end within a family story. It goes much deeper and is significantly broader. Hundreds of Circuit riders toiled to spread the gospel and laid down their lives for the sake of our Christ. Nearly half of Methodist circuit riding preachers died before the age of 30 but they put their life for the gospel and ...because of their sacrifice, we are able to listen life giving-gospel and we can flourish. In fact, the name of our church, Asbury, is the name of the famous circuit rider, Francis Asbury. Thus, those circuit riding preachers’ passion, love, and sacrifice for the gospel is a part of our great spiritual legacy. But our root of faith does not end here. Throughout church history, there were thousands of martyrs who shed their blood and died for faith, which is handed over to us. But, it also does not end there. If we move one step further to the very root of our faith, we will find the unfathomable love of God for us, which is revealed in Jesus Christ who shed his blood for us on the cross.

The root of our faith is not shallow. It is deeply rooted in thousands of people’s blood, tears, sacrifices, prayers, memories and, most of all, God’s unconditional love for us. Therefore, our faith is stronger than despair. Our faith is stronger than any threatening challenges from the world. God planted Asbury UMC by the stream of the living water and our faith is deeply rooted in this unshakable foundation. Don’t be afraid but remember the deep historical root and spiritual legacy of Asbury UMC. Like a tree with deep roots, these deep historical and spiritual roots of our church are the very strength of our church to overcome any challenges from the spiritual draught in our secular society. Return to the root of our faith and meet our mighty God once again. God will restore our strength and will give us a new vision for our church.

During this week, I want you to think about the root of the spiritual legacy that our church has built together for the past 9 decades and what spiritual heritage we have to pass on to the next generations. From that memory, together we can envision our church community’s direction. God will bless our journey of faith and transformation. Amen.