

People Without Faith
 Ezekiel 37:26-28
 Revelation 21:1-6
 Heather Leslie Hammer
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Last week we talked about the Book of Revelation as a vision about a perfect world where people would not ever be without. But, unfortunately, plenty of people *are* without!

One way people are *without*, is when they are without faith.

As we were planning our Native American Awareness Sunday, I picked up a book, by its title, *Dakota* by Kathleen Norris. Norris is a poet, and this book is subtitled *A Spiritual Geography*. It's a poetic description of the Great Plains and how Kathleen Norris found a renewed faith in South Dakota in the bleak terrain of the Great Plains. As a child, Norris had attended a Methodist church in Arlington, VA. She sang in the Cherub Choir and would sing at home with the hymnal on the piano. Even before she was old enough to read, she would turn the pages at the piano and sing the songs from memory. When Norris was in the first grade, she wanted a rosary, like the one her Catholic friend had. But her parents wouldn't let her have one, and so Norris took an old necklace her mother had given her and with it said prayers after the family said their table grace. (She had to mumble the prayers because she had no idea what she was supposed to say.) Norris's father was the grandson of a Methodist minister and didn't care for this little "papist" ritual, but, being rather open-minded, he said she could become a Catholic if she wanted to. She just wouldn't be able to read certain books and she would be forbidden from seeing certain movies. This was when Norris realized that if something seemed too good to be true, it probably was (90-91). Norris's grandmother on one side was a fundamentalist Christian who had a lot to say about "sin."

As an adult, Norris drifted away from church, but then upon moving to South Dakota to live in her grandparents' house, she returned to a Presbyterian church because she felt she "needed to" (94). Something was missing in her life. At that church she found the doctrine hard to swallow, but at a nearby Benedictine monastery she began to feel at home. She read the desert fathers and liked the words of Gregory of Nyssa, who said that "sin is the failure to grow" (99). The Benedictine sisters encouraged Norris to grow and discover her own faith. She found that she wanted the music and ritual of the church she had grown up in, and so she returned to a Protestant church.

South Dakota is a barren place where temperatures range from 60 below zero to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. People have to lean on one another. Norris discovered in the church a sense of community. She claims, on this frontier she built on her past religion and created a future faith. In the words of T. S. Eliot, "The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" (134). Against all odds, Norris rediscovered the religion she was born to and found in it a home. It was for her a rebirth of faith. She found it by leaving the church, coming back, trying out Catholicism, and allowing the traditions of church she had grown up with to fill the void. This is a pattern we see often today—people looking for a spiritual connection and trying different expressions of

it. We hope that people will find a home here at St. John's when they are searching for a place to connect in community and with God.

For some, faith finds rebirth and is strengthened; for others it dies away. Even ministers sometimes lose their faith. John Updike has written a novel about a minister, Clarence Wilmot, who one day concludes he can no longer believe in God. He admits to himself that he can no longer accept as true all the things he has said for years from the pulpit. He no longer believes there is a God who listens to his prayers. In the middle of a sermon, he loses his voice and simply can't go on. His wife steps in and finishes the sermon. The story unfolds as he leaves the ministry and becomes an encyclopedia salesman. He trudges along New Jersey streets door to door, and the family considers him a failure. He dies of tuberculosis. And the novel goes on to cover four generations of people in the family—all subsequent failures. One son turns to drugs, a granddaughter to Hollywood and failed relationships, a grandson to a religious sect that buys guns and plans a Waco-like confrontation. The reader wants to turn back the clock and tell Clarence Wilmot that there *is* a God—that Wilmot somehow lost God, but that God can be found! The novel has the title, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, and so you have to believe that Updike is saying that there *is* a God who is known to us, when "In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea, with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me: As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, while God is marching on."

These words to a verse in "The Battle-Hymn of the Republic" by Julia Ward Howe give us a vision of beauty and glory that makes us holy and free. It's a statement of faith, that Jesus Christ's birth and death makes a difference in our lives. That God is present, marching with us, empowering us to be strong, no matter what happens.

In our reading from Ezekiel, God says to the people: "I will make a covenant of peace with them...my dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (37:26-27). A covenant with the promise: I will be your God!

And in Revelation, John of Patmos sees a vision of this same God, at a time when the early Christians' faith was put to the test by Roman persecution. From seated on the throne, God says, "See, I am making all things new....I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (Rev. 21:5-6).

I believe our Bible has these statements of faith because we need them. Faith isn't always easy to hold onto. But when we don't have it, something is clearly missing in our lives.

Louise Graves has agreed to share with us some of her faith journey this morning.

One way we cultivate our faith is through the use of ritual. Sabbath is a ritual, a habit that reminds us of that we have a covenant with God; in fact, sabbath is a commandment. The Jewish sabbath, or *Shabbat*, begins at Friday sundown—they say when it's dark enough that you can't tell a black from a white thread or when 3 stars can be seen in the sky. And it ends at sunset Saturday evening. Orthodox Jews do no work during the sabbath. They

don't cook, drive cars, use the computer, or even turn on electrical lighting. Orthodox Jews live close enough to their synagogue to walk to Shabbat services Friday evening. The sabbath commandment comes from the Book of Exodus, from the 4th of the 10 Commandments: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work"— and then it goes on to say, not your son, or daughter, or slave, or livestock, or even the resident alien (20:8-11). This is the longest of the 10 Commandments. It appears to have great emphasis.

Since Jesus' resurrection, Sunday has been the Christian Sabbath. Observing sabbath—for us, coming to church on Sunday, and setting the day apart as God's day—reminds us of God's covenant with us. We are God's people.

Our celebration of Holy Communion is a part of the sabbath celebration, with candles and bread and the cup of wine—or juice in the Methodist tradition. It is a celebration of our faith in God and a reminder that God says, "See, I am making all things new." I pray that whatever you are facing today, you are able to face it with God and with the knowledge that in you, God is making all things new.