

9.27.2020 Trinity 16 (John 11:21-44)

*“Fight the good fight of the faith, take hold of the eternal life...”* (1 Timothy 6:12). Those are encouraging words that St. Paul wrote to Timothy, words that we all need to hear, because when you open the Bible what you find is that the heroes of our faith are men and women who fought the good fight and won, and when you look at their examples, you quickly come to the conclusion that to step out in faith is to ask for a fight. Think for a moment about John the Baptist, who God called to step out in faith to prepare the way of Lord. John faithfully identified Jesus as *“The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29), but in doing so he asked for a fight, a fight that landed him in prison and led to his execution. John fought the good fight of faith, and fought so well that Jesus said, *“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist...”* (Matthew 11:11).

Consider St. Peter, the Apostle who faithfully identified Jesus as *“... the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matthew 16:16). To make such a bold profession of faith is to ask for a fight, and that fight came when Jesus was arrested. It was then that Peter cursed, and swore, and denied three times that he ever knew Him. Peter got knocked to the ground in his fight of faith, but Jesus had prayed that Peter’s faith wouldn’t fail, and it didn’t. By the grace of God, faith brought him back to our Lord, and Jesus not only forgave Peter, He gave the man who denied him three times, three opportunities to say to Him, I love you Lord.

You can be sure that every time you step out in faith there will be a test, an obstacle, or a question that will arise and challenge your faith to a good fight. That was true for John the Baptist, for St. Peter, and for a woman named Martha in our Second Lesson this morning. In the passage we read today, Martha is heart-broken over the death of her brother Lazarus. She said to Jesus, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died...”* (John 11:21), yet even in the midst of such grief and sorrow, when Jesus asks if she believes that He is the Resurrection and the Life, Martha says to Him, *“Yes, Lord; I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world”* (John 11:27). Another bold profession of faith, another saint who’s asking for a fight.

Martha stood in the presence of our Lord and boldly professed her faith, yet listen to the dialogue that took place between the two of them just moments later when Jesus was preparing to raise Lazarus from the dead. *“Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days” (John 11:38-39).*

Jesus, the Lord of Life, asked for the stone to be rolled away, because He was preparing to bring light and life into a place where there was only darkness and death. He intended to reveal His Power, His Truth, and His glory to all who were present that day, *that they may believe* (John 11:42), but from Martha’s limited perspective, it was too late. Lazarus was dead. So dead in fact that there was a stench. Martha, who said to Jesus, *“I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you”* (John 11:22). Martha, who declared, *“Yes, Lord; I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God...”* now stood in opposition to God’s plan and purpose. Her bold faith had been challenged to a good fight, and her objection revealed a serious imperfection in her faith, for instead of placing her whole trust in Him, and only Him, she’d formulated her own plan of the best way to move forward, and after doing so, she even attempted to stop Jesus from completing the miracle He came to perform.

Fighting the good fight of faith is not an easy task, it’s a fight, and in times of great trial and sorrow, it’s all out war, but God is faithful. His mercies are *new every morning* (Lamentations 3:22-23). *His steadfast love endures forever* (Psalm 136). *“God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him”* (John 3:17), and therefore, Jesus doesn’t rebuke Martha for her imperfect faith, but instead He ministers to her, reassuring her with the question, *“Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”* (John 11:40).

His question is a powerful reminder for Martha, and for every one of us, that the good fight of faith can only be won if we believe, and stand on the promises of God. *“Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”* Now, if we go back to beginning of this sermon, and think

once again of John the Baptist, we'll see that he fought the good fight of faith by believing the words of our Lord, and standing on His promises. When John was in prison, alone and awaiting his execution, he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "*Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" (Luke 7:19). John asked the question to hear the promise, and Jesus didn't disappoint him, He said to those disciples, "*Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them...*" (Luke 7:22). The promises of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Think again of St. Peter, the way he fought the good fight, and saw the glory of God, by standing on the promises of God. The Gospels record a conversation in which our Lord predicts the fact that Peter will deny knowing Him. In that conversation, Jesus assures Peter that in the end his faith *will not fail*, and tells him, "*... when you have repented and turned to Me again, strengthen your brothers*" (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus knew that Peter's faith was imperfect, but He promised that his faith *will not fail*, and you can be sure that Peter held on to that promise in his darkest hour.

Finally, consider the promise Jesus made to Martha. When she and her sister Mary sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick, He said, "*This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it*" (John 11:4). Martha had received His promise to stand on, "*This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God.*" Standing on His promise was the only way to fight the good fight of faith, and therefore Jesus, at just the right time, reminded her of His promise, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?*"

The examples we considered this morning: John the Baptist, St. Peter, and Martha, they're all evidence that people who make a bold profession of faith are asking for a good fight, and let me remind you, we are people who stand together and boldly profess our faith every Sunday morning when say the Creed. In this world, when we publicly, and verbally declare our faith in God the Father, His only Son our Lord, and the Holy Spirit, we're asking for a fight, and the good fight of faith can only be won when we believe our Lord and stand firmly on His promises. May God give us the strength to boldly

stand on Sunday, and Monday, and by His grace may we not only believe in Him, but believe Him, that we may “*fight the good fight of the faith, take hold of the eternal life...*”