

“Is a Life of Faith Self-Fulfilling?”

Friends – in person and at a physical distance, the Spirit of God (that is, fathomless Love) has gathered us together on this World Communion Sunday and the seventeenth of twenty-four Sundays in the long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of our church year.

Is a life of faith self-fulfilling? When I landed on that question a few weeks ago after first and second read-throughs of today’s scripture passages; the answer felt like a simple, clear, hope infused ‘Yes, indeed! A life of faith is self-fulfilling.’ I have since found a problematic weakness in my original satisfied ‘yes.’ I was attempting to cobble together an image of a life of faith that drew aspects from the prophet Habakkuk, King David the psalmist, and the letter writer posing as the Apostle Paul. But there is no such thing as a composite, universal life of faith. Each life of faith is as unique as the person living it. I hope that the brief meditation I offer this morning (drawing on aspects of three lives of faith) will serve as fodder for your own spiritual reflections, supporting you in arriving to your own nuanced (yet perhaps also simple, clear, and hope infused) ‘yes.’ Each life of faith can be self-fulfilling in beautiful ways.

As we enter now into an extended moment of reflection, let’s each wonder: is my life of faith self-fulfilling? If yes, then how so? Let us pray: Spirit of God, on this World Communion Sunday, we rejoice as we imagine your welcome table spread in many communities across the world today. Yet we also recognize that the most vulnerable in every society (including our own) continue to be shoved to the side, pushed down, forced to the margins, further and further away from access to your full inclusion. As we open ourselves to wonder about our own lives of faith, make us also more open to each and every other life – each created being through which you are embodied and each people group embodying your creativity in particular ways.

And as we enter into this spiritual work, God of love, we return time and again to lean into you to grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

Let's begin by unpacking the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy. I arrived to the term by noticing that each of today's readings suggests that embodying a particular mindset or behavior can lead to the growth of (or more of) the same. One graphic I have found of the flow of a self-fulfilling prophecy loop describes a three-part process of prophecy, behavioral response, and expected outcome. A prophecy (or statement of a truth claim) influences a behavioral response, the behavioral response leads to an expected outcome, and the expected outcome confirms the prophecy.

Let's also wonder together: what IS a life of faith? We might each answer this question differently, yet many of us might draw on concepts of trust and action to define a life of faith. My working definition is this: a life of faith is a person moving in the world in ways that reflect deep trust that divine Love operates in time and space as embodied through their own movements and the movements of all beings. My working definition of a life of faith may or may not resonate with you, but I welcome you to try it on for size and place it in conversation with other concepts that might resonate more deeply with you. Again, I understand my life of faith to be my movements in the world in ways that reflect my deep trust that divine Love operates in time and space as embodied through my movements and the movements of all beings.

Each of today's scriptural voices illuminates a particular truth claim or prophecy about a life of faith. Let's begin with Habakkuk. Scholars note that the book of Habakkuk is unique in that the prophet speaks to God, never addressing a particular human audience.

Therefore, we cannot place Habakkuk in a particular historical context. We read the prophet's voice, crying out to God in distress over the persistent presence of evil and oppression in their societal context. We heard,

“Outrage and violence—this is all I see! All is contention, and discord flourishes. The law loses its hold, and justice never shows itself. The corrupt triumph over those who are righteous, and justice is perverted once again.”

Habakkuk is one of many voices across the millennia of human civilization to demonstrate healthy ways of engaging with the divine through lament, which is passionate expression of grief or sorrow and sometimes the secondary emotion of anger. The self-fulfilling truth claim Habakkuk makes about his life of faith is this: doing justice leads to life. We heard Habakkuk reminded by the voice of God of that self-fulfilling truth:

“Then God replied, ‘Write down this vision... it gives faithful testimony about a time that will come. If it is slow in coming, wait for it – for come it will, without fail:

Look – those whose hearts are corrupt will faint with exhaustion, while those who steadfastly uphold justice will live.’”

Is Habakkuk's self-fulfilling prophecy true for you? Do you find yourself believing that upholding justice will enhance life, do you behave accordingly, and (when you do) does it reap those results?

King David is understood to be an actual historical figure, likely embellished by his admirers and critics as they told and retold stories of his life as part of making sense of their lives of faith. David mentions in a later verse of Psalm 37 that he was writing that particular song in his old age.

The self-fulfilling truth claims David makes about his life of faith are these: those who delight in God's way will be given the desires of their heart; and trust in God will lead to God taking action.

We heard David reciting the Holy Spirit's message to him – an invitation to let in trust, delight and stillness:

*“Trust in God, and do good,
and you'll dwell in the land and enjoy security.
Delight in God, and you'll be given the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to God, and trust in God; God will take action,
making your vindication as sure as the dawn and your integrity as bright as
noonday... Be still before God and wait patiently...”*

Is David's self-fulfilling prophecy true for you? Do you find yourself believing that turning your energy toward trust, delight and stillness will give you the desires of your heart, do you behave accordingly, and (when you do) does it reap those results? David was reflecting back on a life full of ups and down – surely his particular truth claim did not always fulfill itself. Yet he kept returning to trust, delight and stillness as paths toward a strengthened connection with the divine within him and all around him.

The disciple of the Apostle Paul who wrote in Paul's name encouraged Timothy and others to harness and show forth their spiritual gifts as they sought to embody and share Jesus' message of enduring love and life. The self-fulfilling truth claim the first century CE disciple makes about his life of faith is this: If they joined the Spirit in fanning their gifts into flame, they would continue to burn brightly with the gospel light of eternal life. We heard the disciple exude hopefulness in these words:

“... I want to remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God didn't give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, of self-discipline... join with me in suffering for the Gospel by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done, but because of God's own purpose and grace.

This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has destroyed death, and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.”

Is the first century disciple’s self-fulfilling prophecy true for you? Do you find yourself believing that joining the Spirit in fanning the flame of your gifts will lead to you burning more brightly with the eternal life of the gospel message, do you behave accordingly, and (when you do) does it reap those results?

Friends, what do you claim to be true in your life of faith?

My own core truth claim is that openness to both questions and convictions about God’s activity in the world will strengthen my faith. I behave accordingly (much of the time) and the Spirit is a faithful companion in making it so.

With Habakkuk, let us uphold justice. With David, let us trust, delight, and be still. With the first century CE disciple, let us be open to the Spirit fanning the flame of eternal life in and through us. Love is counting on us. Amen!

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Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2: 1-4, Psalm 37: 1-8a, 2 Timothy 1: 1-10