

Faith Has Come

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Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

I am a Mizo. While I come from Myanmar, most Mizo people live primarily in the state of Mizoram in Northeast India. We Mizos have a lake we love more than any other. It is heart-shaped. It is located at the foot of the mountains and it is beautiful. It is called Rih Lake.

This lake is featured in love stories; its myths include dragons and elephant graveyards; and it is said to be a portal leading to the after-life! The Mizoram official annual state calendar almost always has a picture of it. The strange thing is that the Indian state of Mizoram claims this to be their beloved and biggest lake. But, it is not even located in India. It is across the border in Myanmar!

Another Mizo symbol is a huge ancient banyan tree found in the village of Khampat. It is a symbol of hope and promise for us. As a people, Mizos were pushed by others from Mongolia, across China, and all the way to Khampat valley in Myanmar - which is right outside of my Grandmother's village. It was a very fertile river valley where the water was clean and full of fish. The soil was good for growing rice and other food. Fruit trees like mangos, oranges and pears were plentiful...just like Florida.

Life was simple, good and safe. But, the Mizo people were again pushed out and up into the mountains above them and across into what is now called Mizoram state, India. As they were about to leave Khampat, they planted a small banyan tree. As they left, they created a poem.

*"You little banyan tree, by God's grace,
live well and grow.
We must leave you now.
We will return when your branches
reach back to the ground and root again."*

So they kept moving as they were being chased by the Shan people. Finally, the Mizos found safety in the mountains.

When Mizos returned to Khampat valley, the banyan tree had grown and its branches had rooted again to the ground, full of leaves and life.

The sign and promise, that Mizos would return, had been fulfilled.

The planting of the little banyan tree and reciting the poem were symbols of the hope and promise to return. It was that the gods were blessing them on our way and that good awaited them.

That good was fulfilled for us Mizos in a magnificent way when, up in those mountains, the gospel of Jesus Christ was brought by Welsh Presbyterian missionaries. My Mizo people's story was of a wandering people who clung to hope in moving to always more remote and difficult terrain. It became a story of faith, a story of a people called by God to love and serve God and to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. The tree became a symbol of God's blessing on the way to the greater blessing of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

I am telling you these stories because they are from the memory of my people and memory has a great deal to do with faith. Faith is more than just belief. Faith, in my understanding, is risking and stepping our lives forward based on our belief in God. Faith is belief in action. It is not that our risk earns us righteousness. As the Apostle Paul said to the Galatians, we cannot earn righteousness. Everything we do as followers of Christ is our joyful response to the grace God has already given us.

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Let me risk a *Winnie the Pooh* story. *Winnie the Pooh* is a children's story book about a stuffed toy bear. He and the other characters in these stories - like little Piglet, Owl, Kanga the Kangaroo, sad Eeyore the donkey, and always-hurrying Rabbit and his many relations - all live in the Hundred-Acre Wood.

In reality they, like Pooh, belong to Christopher Robin - who was a real boy. This story is less of a Pooh story than it is a Piglet story.

Pooh and Piglet had gone visiting on a blustery day. While they were visiting Owl, the wind blew down the tree that held Owl's house. Owl, Pooh and Piglet were trapped inside. The only exit was the letter-slot in the door - which was now where the ceiling ought to be.

Because only Piglet was small enough to fit through, he bravely agreed to be pulled up by a string to the letter-slot so he could wriggle out and run for help. He asked what would happen if the string broke. He was not much comforted when Owl said that if the string broke they could just try another. But friend Pooh promised to stand below him. I suppose he would catch Piglet or at least cushion his fall. So, Piglet agreed and escaped and got them all help. Pooh wrote a song in brave Piglet's honor.

Meanwhile, everyone in the Hundred-acre Wood tried to help Owl find a new home. Eeyore, the

donkey, found one. The only problem was that it was already Piglet's home - which he rather liked. But, Piglet was now the small creature who had the memory of risking danger to save others. Piglet didn't just think it was a good idea to help others. He moved from idea to action. Piglet lived his faith again ... and gave his house away to Owl. Happily, Pooh also had faith in friendship and asked Piglet to live with him.

In Galatians 3, the Apostle Paul explains how all people can live faith that is counted as righteousness - which means it puts us in right relationship with God.

In Paul's time, there was great controversy over whether or not gentiles, who became Christians, had to obey the Jewish law as well as have faith in Christ. Paul calls both Jewish and Gentile Christians to remember that the law may moderate behavior but it doesn't give salvation. Salvation comes only through faith in God.

Abraham, Paul said, was called by God to follow God. In faith, Abraham did follow God. God counted that to Abraham as righteousness. God made a promise to Abraham saying that not only Abraham but his offspring, who would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, would be claimed as God's people and God would be their God.

The Apostle Paul said the promise applied to everyone who acts in faith in response to God's call. All such people are Abraham's offspring and children of God. Paul feared that if people put their faith in the law, they would think their own obedience got them their salvation rather than God's gracious acts on their behalf.

The Apostle Paul felt so strongly about this he said to them, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?...Did you experience so much for nothing?"

Paul spoke so strongly because he felt what was being taught and done in Galatia in his absence was a complete distortion of the gospel. It reversed the point of grace and clouded the church's vision of God at work in their midst. This was a very serious matter.

Paul wanted the Galatian Christians to remember that salvation was about God's good acts - not human effort. He wanted them to remember the gospel as he had taught it to them. The gospel good news was that God acted for all people in Jesus' life, crucifixion and resurrection.

Paul wanted them to remember hearing God's call to them and to step forward in faith. He asked if they were going to give up the faith they had freely received in God's grace? Were they going to replace free grace with a doomed effort to earn their own salvation?

For Paul (and for the poets and psalmists of the Old Testament) remembering was not an intellectual recollection. To remember was to relive, in the present, some great experience of God's grace. The experience could be from the past or anticipated from the future. It was to live trust and to live thanksgiving for what God has done, is doing, and will do.

For example, this weekend we celebrate Memorial Day. We remember the names of those we know

who died in service of the country. We remember and honor those many others whose names and stories we will never know. It is easy to believe that many men and women give their lives in war for the sake of our freedom. But it takes something more to step forward as a country in faith. Every generation produces people willing to sacrifice for the life and freedom of this country!

For Mizo people, Rih Lake and the banyan tree at Khampat valley are living symbols of God's leading of us as a people. They are reminders of God's care for us - even before we knew the gospel. God had us and cared for us and led us. Remembering what God has done in the past, we step forward in faith.

We at COP are also a people who remember who we are with a tree. For 60 years, we have gathered under the tree; and built buildings around the tree; and served the hungry and tutored students near the tree; and established a memorial garden beneath the tree. Every Sunday we gather as a people of God in fellowship in the shade of the tree. This is to say nothing of what else happens under the tree: preschool parades, one-on one-counselling, youth fellowship, small group meetings and prayer.

For 60 years, we have remembered and grown the list of the ways in which God has been gracious to us.

For 60 years in faith, we received and celebrated our salvation.

For 60 years, our right relationship with God has been the gift of God's grace for us not the limited goodness of any effort we ourselves might have made.

For 60 years, we have had faith and lived our faith loving God and loving neighbors.

Now, we are again stepping out in faith building the Palm Center to serve members and community alike to come and feel and experience the love

and grace of God. (It is not too late to be a part of faithfully rejoicing in God's grace by contributing to this latest expression of faith.)

Because faith has come into our hearts and daily lives, we are one in Christ regardless of our race, our background, our culture, our accent, our economic standing, our orientation, or our political affiliation.

In faith, we are one in Christ who is our light and our salvation.

Thanks be to God for the faith that has come!



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