

“DON’T BE ASHAMED”

(Narnia 3)

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2 Timothy 1:8-12 (p. 1155)

Four children: Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy, had gone to stay in an enchanting old country house. Lucy had gotten into Narnia through a magic wardrobe and there she had met a Faun named Tumnus. Now she had returned. But as she would soon discover, the others weren’t nearly as ready to share her enthusiasm as she had expected. In fact, she would soon find herself humiliated and quite demoralized.

“The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” – Chapter 3

We have yet to meet the lion; but we’ve now had a first encounter with the witch – and now we know something more about the wardrobe. Next time we’ll take a closer look at how Edmund got on with the witch. But for now I want us to go back to that moment when Lucy emerged from her first venture into Narnia. *“It’s all right,”* she called out, *“I’ve come back.”* But despite every effort to convince the others that she was telling the truth, none of them believed her. And of course, when they examined the wardrobe they found a solid wooden back – hard evidence that Lucy simply couldn’t refute. And when she tried to convince them that she wasn’t pretending, she hardly knew what she was trying to say, and finally burst into tears. Poor Lucy. Even though she was telling the truth, she was shamed and shunned. But worse than that, she began to doubt the reality of what she had personally experienced.

It was on a particularly dismal day when the children were playing hide-and-seek that Lucy went back to the room where the wardrobe was. She didn’t plan to hide in the wardrobe; she knew that would only cause her more embarrassment. But then comes perhaps the saddest line in the chapter. Lewis writes: *“But she did want to have one more look inside it; for by this time she was beginning to wonder herself whether Narnia and the Faun had not been a dream.”*

Lucy isn’t alone, you know. There is a little secret that Christians seldom talk about, even among their closest friends. That secret is that probably all of us have entertained doubts about the reality of our faith. And I suspect the reason we don’t talk about it is that we are secretly ashamed of our apparent lack of faith. I daresay, at one time or another, nearly every one of us has wondered whether our experience of faith wasn’t a kind of dream – wishful thinking – self-delusion. And

I suspect those times of self-doubt of which we may be ashamed are most often triggered by circumstances that seem to challenge our faith.

Consider today's scripture lesson. When Paul's protégé, Timothy, was called to be the pastor of the church in Ephesus, that young man was confronted right from the outset by pressure from a hostile, unbelieving community and bickering within the church. More than once, I imagine, Timothy wondered if he hadn't taken a wrong turn somewhere along the line. I'm sure there were times when he was ready to demit the ministry and take up a less stressful occupation – something like snake handling. He was discouraged and, I suspect, ashamed of his lack of faith.

I say that because God evidently had to send him a reminder of his high calling through Paul. And in that letter, Timothy's mentor wrote these galvanizing words: *"For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God... For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind. Therefore do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord."* I don't think Paul would have told him to not be ashamed unless that was likely the case. Paul told Timothy, in effect, *"Don't be ashamed to stand up for what you know to be true, even when others call you crazy – even when you begin to wonder if they're right. Because what is true is true, whether anyone else agrees that it is so."* So let me ask you: What do you know to be true – despite your doubts and whether you can prove it to others' satisfaction or not? Allow me to remind you of three things that you, as a Christian, can know and need never be ashamed of knowing.

I. In our lesson today Paul said, *"I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed..."* Notice he didn't say, *"I hope I know..."* He didn't say, *"I think I know..."* He said, *"I know!"* When you base your convictions not on hoping or thinking but on knowing, you can handle the doubts that will inevitably assail you both from without and within. That is the heart of the Christian faith. Faith isn't a matter of convincing yourself that something is true despite the evidence. Faith is knowing a person. Whatever else Christianity is (in terms of principles and rules and guidelines and doctrines) it is fundamentally a relationship with the person, Jesus Christ, in whom the eternal God who created the universe has revealed himself – personally.

Now clearly, some people would prefer their belief in God not be quite that personal. It's like those who believe in the idea of marriage in general, but don't believe in their own husband or wife in particular. Or those who believe in personal responsibility when it's applied to society in general, but can then find all sorts of excuses when they are expected to be personally responsible for something.

In the same way, there are those who prefer a comfortably abstract idea of who God is and what God expects of them. As long as God is an amorphous

“ultimate goodness” or some “supreme being,” they feel like they don’t have anyone to whom they must answer for their conduct. But God made us to respond personally; and that’s why God’s greatest self-revelation is the person of Jesus Christ. So the primary question we face is not, “*Who am I?*” The question of first importance is, “*Whose am I?*” And for Christians, one of our basic affirmations is: “*I know whom I have believed, and I trust him.*” Don’t ever be ashamed of that.

2. Here’s a second thing we can know. St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: “***We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him.***” That has to be one of the most misunderstood passages in Scripture. At times Paul is misquoted here, as if he were saying: “*All things work together for good.*” Well, common sense tells us that some things don’t work for good, in fact they work for evil; while other things don’t seem to work, period. But that’s not what Paul said. He said: “*In everything God works for good with us.*”

Paul knows that when we cooperate with God, out of all the difficulties and troubles we face, new possibilities can emerge; good can come out of bad. I’ll admit there are times when I don’t have a clue why it is that really terrible things sometimes happen to certain people. You can’t say they deserve it. In fact, there are times when you want to cry out, “*They deserve better than this!*” One of the lessons I have to learn over and over again is this: If I’m willing to cooperate with God, (that is, if I’m willing to be teachable and available rather than closed-minded and critical) then, regardless of the circumstances, God’s good will will prevail.

Put simply: What you face isn’t nearly as important as how you face it. And when you face life with an attitude of cooperating with God, regardless of the circumstances, you will discover a great truth that Paul and countless Christians have come to know: Christ and I are an overwhelming majority. God has a purpose in making you as he did, and placing you with the gifts you’ve been given, right where you are. Face it: All things don’t work together for good. But God does; and if you will cooperate with him, you will know that your life has purpose. And you need never be ashamed of that.

3. Don’t be ashamed of knowing the person, Jesus, and knowing that your life has purpose. And one more thing you can know: In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote: “***We know that if this mortal house we inhabit is destroyed, we have a permanent home in heaven.***” If you’re a Christian, you can know not only a person and a purpose, but also a promise. And the promise is that life is not only greater than circumstances; by the grace of God, life is also greater than death.

I don’t mention that promise lightly. I know some of you today are wrestling with the reality of your own mortality or that of someone dear to you. But even if you weren’t, these days there’s great emphasis placed on living for the

present, as if this life were all there is to life. The fact is, people are generally hesitant to talk about their own death, let alone the death of loved ones. But the Christian faith stands squarely before us and speaks about it quite unashamedly.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, every last one of us has an irrepressible sense that this world is not the end of things, but a passage through which we move to something more. C. S. Lewis, that inimitable rationalist, put the matter this way: *“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”* However much we may love these bodies of ours, we know they are temporary at best, and that the persons we are will somehow go on. The persistent question is: Go on to what?

Sad to say, far too many people spend their lives trying to suppress an uneasy fear of that unseen, unknown place the other side of death. But for the Christian there need be no fear, because we know that the other side of death, while unseen, is not unknown. Jesus said, *“In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me.”* We know that God has promised us eternal life with him, because it is guaranteed in the life and death and living presence of our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. We know this.

You need never be ashamed; because you can say with St. Paul, *“I know whom I have believed, and I trust him.”* And you can say, *“I know that in everything God works for good with those who love him.”* And you also can say, *“I know I have an eternal home in heaven.”* That person and purpose and promise are what give your life permanent meaning. Don’t be ashamed to say you know it’s true.

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