

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

And what he meant was that he trusted God. And that gave him the courage to face the uncertainty as he was trying to deal with his body that was failing him. But our faith also has a different dimension, our faith doesn't just have the job of comforting us, it has the job of compelling us. With our faith, God is moving us, traversing us from the beginning of our baptism to its fulfillment. And I've been thinking about our faith.

And I've been thinking about it in context of what's happening in our nation which certainly feels like great division and great discomfort. What are people who believe in Jesus Christ supposed to say or do about immigration, and gun violence, the rhetoric that's flying across party lines, the chance for some and against others? What does it mean for us to be fulfilling our baptismal calling today?

I think our faith is stressful. But it [audio skip 01:22] we're called to stop all the arguing and provide solutions. There are no easy answers here. And especially in times when rhetoric is divisive, perhaps Jesus is going to be able to change things through this volley of fire. And, after all, He does warn us He is not here to bring us a false sense of peace. God will expose the multiple ways we are falling short, and God can make good come out of conflict.

But someone needs to embody the ever never-failing presence of love that exists, because God made us and God bound us all together. Somebody has to do that hard work. I think our faith is stressful because it actually makes this demand on us: stay in the line of fire, do not retreat. Be in the midst of the difficulty and the pain. Why? Because that's where Jesus is. I think we're called to be like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were in that fiery furnace and stayed because of the fourth person that was there.

God is going to act in good time. But what you and I are called to do is to undergo that stress and stay where it's hot. And here's what I realize, when you are in that heat, when you're in the midst of that fire, it actually starts to work on you. It becomes like a refiner's fire. It's testing you. It's molding you. It's changing you. It's shaping you just as much as it's doing to others. But while you're in that fire, use your God-given gifts to make the stress manageable and to increase your capacity.

So if you're kind, use your kindness. If you're generous, give all that you want. If you're funny, bring levity, that sense of humor is such a gift. You've been called into that place of difficulty because God baptized you in all your particularities. Now I'm going to provide you with an example from my own life, but before I do that I want you to hear this. Your faith is your own. You know it well. You know how far you have come by faith when you entered into the church through your baptism, and how far you still have to go to make Christ the center of your life while clinging to the cross.

You also know, because God let's you know what you're supposed to be stressed out about. And it's nothing fancy, right? It's about making sure that love is shaping the way that we live with our neighbors. It's about making sure that there is enough for each of us. It's about sharing what we've been given since Christ gave it to us in the first place. It's about creating spaces of sanctuary for all people to thrive and live, not just your own type, and so on and so forth. It's not fancy. But use your gifts. Stay in the heat. And let the fire that you experience shape you and mold you, and have faith that God is at work.

So here's my personal example. I've known for a long time that part of my journey to the center has involved something that I have a fire in my belly for. I've always deeply, deeply desired racial reconciliation. I have this vision, this dream of all people of all races actually calling one another brother and sister and acting like it. And I stay up at night thinking about it.

I have these wonderful hopes of delight and ecstasy as we all gather together. And I even married a man who studies it, but I have no idea how to bring this about here in the city of Detroit. I felt like I was witnessing some change when I lived in North Carolina a long time ago, but then God yanked us from North Carolina and moved us to Detroit, north of Eight Mile. So I tried. I tried to fulfill my baptismal calling, and I tried all kinds of things. I would speak, I would listen. I would create all kinds of opportunities, and nothing worked. Nothing.

My words fell like lead. And I made lots of mistakes. And it was the fire that God was using to refine me. So that ten years later, after making no headway at all, I was open to anything God wanted. And what God wanted was to place me in a fairly White, very large Episcopal church in the suburbs of Detroit. And here I witnessed what God can do among the races. Here we used art and jazz. We used adaptive leadership and interfaith work, and we watched the needle move.

I learned from a White rector how to engage in bridge building. And it turns out that it actually requires a sheer act of faith to think a church can begin to heal the racial divide that has torn up Detroit for so long. But it's because of our faith that we feel compelled to continue. It's because the Lord is in it. We all have a baptism with which to be baptized. And we are under stress as we complete it, but we make the journey with Christ.

Amen.

[End of Recording]