

**27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 3, 2010, 10:00 a.m.**

**J.A. Loftus, S.J.**

**Today's readings offer a meditation on the language of faith. They ought to be enlightening and consoling for all of us trying to live a life of faith. Let me start with *Swan*, Mary Oliver's brand new book of poems just released. One called "Wind in the Pines," speaks to today's liturgical meditation. Wind in the Pines:**

**"Is it true that the wind  
streaming especially in the fall  
through the pines  
is saying nothing, nothing at all,  
or is it just that I don't yet know the language?"**

**Our liturgy today offers three distinct perspectives on knowing a new language, the language of faith.**

**Let's start with St. Luke's gospel. Jesus makes the point that we**

should expect that faith will make a difference in our lives, and in our world. Faith *does* something; at the very least, it changes the way we view the world. But at the very most, it can re-distribute the energy of the planet. In faith, mulberry trees can learn to live under water. And wind can speak to us.

Now when was the last time you moved a mulberry tree from Commonwealth Avenue into the Harbor? Doesn't happen too often, I suspect. And then, if you're like me, you feel a little guilty and say to yourself: it's because I have such little faith. Mine is not even as big as a tiny mustard seed, otherwise I could move trees—or sometimes even mountains.

And once again, we miss the real point Jesus is trying to make. He is not trying to make his disciples feel guilty because of their lack of faith; he is trying to tell them that they need to *expect* strange things to happen when they do live in faith. It can and does change the way the world operates.

And he says, furthermore, that this is the way it is supposed to be; for this we were created. So don't expect it to be a big deal; don't expect applause when faith does move mountains. It's supposed to! Living in faith is just doing what we're supposed to do—even if we feel like we don't know what we're doing. (That's the part about the unprofitable servant just doing what he is supposed to do.) Expect faith to move trees (and in other places,

mountains) and it can. We call this “positive psychology” in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century—and it is a booming new specialty within the social sciences. But it does work! So don’t bother dumping on yourself for your lack of faith. Believe!

St. Paul adds a second perspective on faith that should make us feel even better. He says to his friend Timothy: “stir into flame the gift of God that you have.” He is reminding us that faith is sometimes like a dying wood fire. Faith sometimes needs to be fanned back into flame. You don’t have to feel bad about that in your own life; that’s the nature of faith. It ebbs and flows; it flames sometimes, and sometimes it is barely a flicker.

In faith, as in so much else, some days are better than others. The Hebrew psalmists knew this so well. Hence a refrain like the one today from Psalm 95. “*If* today you hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts.” “*If!*” The implication is that it won’t necessarily happen everyday that we hear God’s voice; that, too, is in the nature of faith.

I am reminded of a similar line from the wonderful Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: “I greet him on the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.” But the clear implication is that some days I may neither meet nor greet him.

And our third and final perspective on faith comes from the

prophet Habakkuk. He tries to answer the question how long will it take until my faith is certain, complete, final? And his simple answer is: a whole lifetime. It seems that faith, too, is always shifting, doubting. The great Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno once said: “faith which has no doubt, is no faith at all.” Faith is complex and always a matter of trial and error. It takes time and lots of practice to see with and through God’s eyes. But that’s what faith really is. Seeing yourself and each other and the world through God’s eyes.

But that *seeing, through God’s eyes*, takes a lifetime. Hence the prophet Habakkuk begins his book this morning saying again to himself and to us: “I cry for help. How long, O Lord, how long must I wait.” The answer, of course, is that he, Habakkuk, and you and I, must wait a lifetime. Faith is meant to last a whole lifetime. It can be very frustrating not to know, not to see, not to yet be with God. It can be frustrating to be a person of faith!

It is, of course, the football season and the fall of the year. Once again, my friend and favorite theologian Charles Shultz captures the same sentiment precisely. In one of the more famous scenarios from “Peanuts,” Charlie Brown is continually trying to kick an extra point playing football. Lucy always gets to hold the ball while Charlie tries the kick. And every time

Charlie gets to the ball, Lucy pulls it away and Charlie ends-up on his...behind. In one of the final re-plays of this bizarre contest, Shultz actually has Charlie Brown quote, in Latin, mind you, the opening lines from the prophet Habakkuk that we just heard this morning. The very same line!

Charlie is skeptical that he should have any more faith in Lucy holding the ball. But he tries one last time. She pulls it away. And,, from his embarrassed position on his...behind, he shouts to the heavens: *Quam dieu , Domine, quam dieu?* How long, O lord, how long? And in the final frame, Lucy quietly says back: “all your life, Charlie Brown. All your life.”

Faith is like that. We get up; we fall down; and people are always pulling the ball out from under us. But faith is the vision in God’s eye that can uproot trees, and move mountains, and burst into flame in the most unlikely times and places. The language of faith whispers through pine trees too. But only if I know the language. So with our fellow traveler in faith, Gerard Manley Hopkins, let us too “Greet him on the days we meet him, and bless when we understand.” Peace!