What it means "to believe."

John 1:6-8, 19-28

A sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent

This year on the First Sunday of Advent we had the verse from Isaiah that Luther lifted up repeatedly: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). Then the Second Sunday of Advent we had that Advent message: "Wake, awake for night is flying." Wake up. But we don't wake up and we can't. Rather, God does it. As we can see there is a real progression in this season of Advent – our best works are sinful, we don't wake up as we should – which means that we are now faced with a huge question: Since God does it, does that mean that everybody is saved? We can quote Scripture, for example, 2 Peter 3:9 that God's will is that "none should perish." Or does this mean, as the Psalmist says, that if the Lord would count iniquities, who could stand? None of us. Is there then really no hope?

We are really talking about the basic problem of what it means "to believe" and how God saves us. There are certain illustrations we have from Scripture and from the words "faith" and "believing" as they are popularly understood.

First, it is that faith is a gift. This is found in Romans 3:24 as well as many other places. We get caught in the idea that of course it's a gift, but we have to accept it. This is the Roman Catholic view of how this works, and it is caught up in the idea that yes, we're 99% sinful, but there is still that 1% in us because of the image of God, that we have to be responsible, that we do have to accept it, otherwise we don't understand it.

The second picture that is used is that faith is like an elevator that comes down and lifts us up, but we have to step on the elevator. That of course means that one is doing something to make it work.

Another illustration is that of a child getting an operation, but because the child is not old enough to sign the release for the operation, the parents do it. By this analogy faith is something that happens through the family. That raises the problem: Do you believe through the family? That's the Reformed/Presbyterian view of Baptism. The family carries the child in faith; the family believes for the child until the child is old enough to believe on his or her own. There are Bible verses that speak to this.

The Gospel text for today from the Gospel of John is about John the Baptist, who comes to bear witness to the light, to point to Christ. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, after John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus begins his ministry, announcing: "[T]he kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). There are many places in the Gospels where it says: "Your faith has saved you." "Your faith has made you well." Or "If you believe, you shall be saved."

Who can blame those who complain about us Lutherans, saying: "Don't Lutherans know what Scripture says? Don't they know what's there?" There are Bible verses which say: "You are saved by believing." "You have to have faith."

Challenges like this are the first volley in the game of: "I've got a Bible quote that trumps your Bible quote." If we're going to play that game now and someone says: "You are saved by believing," here's a Bible verse to shoot right back: 1 Peter 3:21: "Baptism saves."

What do we do when the Bible says one thing here and another thing there? First, the way out of the "My Bible quote trumps your Bible quote" game is to look at the basic point: **Anything that takes away from the sole sufficiency of the cross is to be questioned.** "The cross alone is our theology," as Luther pointed out. Otherwise, the cross is less important, not what it is. That goes along with Isaiah 64:6: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags." It's like two sides of a coin: The cross alone on one side. All our works, including our good works, are sinful on the other side.

Second, all that is well and good, but we are still caught by our modern way of thinking. Our modern way of thinking says is that what is real and true must be something I can feel, experience, and decide about. Whatever is real has to be real for me. It has to involve my experience, my feelings, and my decision. We think we have to see and know how the Holy Spirit is working. We assume we can and should be able to see and know how the Holy Spirit is working and what the Spirit is doing.

Here we always keep in mind what Paul writes in 2 Cor 11:14: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."

Any idea that we can see the Holy Spirit at work is subject to the question: How do you know? How do you sort that out?

This brings us to the third point: We think we can sort that out. We think we have to judge whether we have faith, whether we have this experience, and it's real. We think we can judge ourselves, whether we've decided the right question in the right way. The problem therefore is: How do we know that we have judged correctly? How do we know that we have done it rightly and earnestly enough?

Luther faced this problem as did Paul before him. Luther points to Paul's answer in 1 Cor 4:3-4, where Paul, in conflict with his opponents, writes: "It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me."

That means that it is the Lord who says what is and what isn't.

This goes even for "faith" and "believing." It is God's doing. The best example of this is infant Baptism. That tells us what it is like. God is the one who makes it happen. The tiny baby doesn't believe, doesn't know what's happening, but the child is saved and given faith and eternal life. As Isaiah 61:10 says: "He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness."

This goes for adult Baptism, too. Adult Baptism is simply delayed infant Baptism. Baptism is the means by which the Lord reaches down and saves us from the abyss, saves us from the jaws of the evil one. God does it.

Finally, we have to watch out for those who say: "We can't accept the gift of faith, but we can reject it." That of course is to play another game, a word game that really means if we don't explicitly reject it, then we have implicitly accepted it. But sorting out what "faith" is and isn't is not that kind of word game either.

What it is about is that everything depends on the promise of the Lord. There's a new word going around; it's "uhopia," instead of utopia. You hope it happens, you hope it works, you hope, you hope, you hope, but who knows? It's all kind of iffy.

We remember, of course, what is different about the Lord's promises. The Lord's promises are not like our promises. They are not iffy, not conditional. They are not dependent on feelings, experiences, decisions. His promises are sure, and what he says he does. Therefore, when he says to us: "I make you my own," that happens.

Well, we say: "I don't understand this!" Of course not. But this is where we have certainty. The certainty, the clarity is that God does it, and he does it this way, his way. As I Thessalonians 5:24 states: "He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."

To be sure, it doesn't depend on us, our decisions, our feelings, our experiences. Thank God.

What about other people then? That's his problem. When we take on his problem as our problem, then we're playing God.

Finally, there is only one point. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ, as it says in Romans 10:17. How does it happen? It happens by the hearing of the preaching of Christ.

Since that's the way it happens, there is only one thing left to think about and that is: "How do we get the word out?"

We call it mission. How do we get the word out because otherwise people haven't heard? We don't know what happens to people who haven't heard, but think of the amazing message – the clear, certain message about being saved in Jesus Christ. Amen

[Good Christian friends, rejoice With heart and soul and voice;
Now ye need not fear the grave; Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all To gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save."]