

This past Friday I had the opportunity to hear Krista Tippett. Along with a few other people from the Cathedral I attended the annual convention of the Consortium of Endowed Parishes – in Austin this year.

Krista Tippett was the keynote speaker. In case you don't know who she is – and I didn't – she is the host of a public radio program called "Speaking of Faith" which is carried by more than 200 radio stations both in this country and abroad. She's a bright woman with a degree from Brown and a Master in Divinity from Yale. She has a background in journalism and was at one time the chief aide in Berlin to the U.S. ambassador to West Germany. She has a book out called *Speaking of Faith : Why Religion Matters and How to Talk About It*.

Much of what she said was predictable and not terribly memorable. You know how that goes. But she said one thing that caught my attention, and I have been mulling it over for the past couple of days. She said that one of the assumptions people make about religion – especially from the outside – is that religion is about what you believe. She wants to suggest that authentic religion is about how you live and what you do – how you pray, and how you make sense and meaning out of your life. She likes to talk about the intersection of great religious ideas and human experience – the intersection of theology and real life.

There is a sense in which what she says is true. What we believe is important, but it is only really important in how it affects what we do. A creed- any creed – isn't an end unto itself. In spite of what a number of people – religious people – say, faith isn't about right thinking. How does what I believe inform my life? There is nothing loving or holy about beating each other with dogma. Fighting over truth doesn't take us any further on a journey toward a God who is love.

Author Elizabeth Gilbert said of Krista Tippett: "Her intelligence is like a salve for all who have been wounded or marginalized by the God Wars." That is quite a gift indeed.

But there is another sense in which she is wrong. In the Bible belief has more to do with the heart than it does the head. Belief and trust are closely related words, sometimes interchangeable. It is one thing to say I believe that God is love. It is something different to trust that love to hold me and to bring meaning and purpose into my life.

Right after this sermon we will stand and say together the Nicene Creed as Christians have for almost 1700 years. As we say "We believe," try thinking "trust." "We trust in one God." We trust the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus. We trust the Holy Spirit. See if it makes any difference.

It isn't so much about intellectual assent or the precise definition of particular words. It is about a relationship. It is about being in love with this God who creates us and redeems us.

In our times it is easy to fall into despair and hopelessness. That is probably true of all times, but the news seems especially gloomy these days. Bad news is more popular than good news. Bad news is more quickly believed and spread than good news. And maybe as information grows by leaps and bounds in both volume and speed there's just bound to be more bad news. But it seems especially gloomy these days.

It is easy to be seduced by a spirit of scarcity. There isn't enough to go around – enough of anything. It is important to get mine and hold on to it and protect it.

It is easy to be afraid. Afraid of being vulnerable or taking the risk to trust anything or anyone other than myself. Afraid of being hurt. Afraid of being taken advantage of and played the fool. Afraid of not having enough. Afraid of dying. Always afraid of dying. Afraid to really follow Jesus in the way of compassion and sacrifice lest I, too, be crucified.

God came to Abraham in a vision with a promise. Actually it was the promise that made Abraham change his name. At this point he was still Abram.

“Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” The problem was that Abraham and Sarah had no children; there was no heir, other than a legal heir.

It's hard to really grasp the impact of that simple fact. They had no children. In their day, in their culture, that was everything. The purpose of life was fulfilled through children. The absence of children stripped the meaning away. There was no point. It didn't matter how rich you were or how blessed your life was.

And so Abram responds to this vision of promise: “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless.” What could you give me that would make any difference? Nothing really matters.

And then God took Abraham outside to see the night sky. “Count the stars, if you are able to count them.” “So shall your descendants be.” You will not remain childless.

And then Genesis says Abram “believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” It's an interesting word, reckoned. It's a form of the word for word. God worded him righteous. God spoke him righteous. Abraham trusted the promise as preposterous as it was. He opened himself to the promise of God.

Abraham's righteousness wasn't that he became particularly pious or a paragon of moral virtue. If you read the rest of the story you will discover that Abraham is not without flaws. It took a lot of years for the promise to be fulfilled, and there were times when Abraham and Sarah tried to do it their own way.

But Abraham trusted and through that trust he was drawn into a relationship with God. He was held dear. Abraham lived his life as someone who would have descendants as numerous as the stars. He lived not in despair or hopelessness but as someone whose life mattered – someone who made a difference.

That was his righteousness, his belief, his trust. He lived with the expectation of having an heir as unbelievable as that was and as long as it was in the coming.

The promises of God are outrageous. There's no real hard evidence for them. They really seem rather unlikely. God promises to love me as unlovable as I know myself to be. God promises to pursue me as frightening as that may be and as much as I may run. God promises to provide me with the bounty of the world around me as much as I may distort it and seek to own it for myself. And God promises to raise me up each and every time I die. God will not let go. Just look at the stars. Count them if you can.

They are outrageous promises. Unbelievable, really. To trust them seems like a pretty big risk to take. The temptation is to keep them in the head, safe from the heart.

But the question stays in front of us, especially in this season of Lent. Do you believe? What would happen if I lived in that trust?

Amen.

The Very Reverend Joe D. Reynolds
Dean