Some of the things that we are supposed to do as we go through Lent are to strengthen our virtues and cast off our vices. In Boy Scout terms we are to leave the campsite cleaner than we found it, except that we are the campsite and we aren’t camping but in Lent – otherwise my analogy works perfectly. As a result of this emphasis on self-improvement, the readings appointed are sometimes reminders of the virtues we are supposed to be working on. Such is the case in what we hear from St. Paul today in his letter to the Romans where he says, “For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” The virtue that is highlighted here is faith and so what I want to spend the next few minutes doing is defining the word and then understanding why it is so important in terms of being a Christian.

To begin with, let’s look at the word faith and get a definition. So here it is: Faith is the belief that something untested is true. This may sound sort of vacuous in our modern society which purports that science is what is true and science, we are told, is always tested. But that isn’t quite right, because tests can only work one direction and that is in the past. However, most everything we do in our lives is about future actions and those are based on faith because it requires us to believe that what was true in the past will be true in the future. If that was confusing let me try to explain.

I am here today being recorded for a service. Now, for a moment think about all the things I had to take on faith just to get to this building this morning. To begin with when I went out to get into my car, I had faith that the car would start. If I didn’t why would I have bothered to press the start button? Why did I have this faith, I had it because my car had started yesterday and the day before that. But it wasn’t just the car, there were also many other things I took on faith. When I got to the church building, I had faith that my key would unlock the door and when I walked in, I had faith that the floorboards would support my weight. I had faith in all these things because, like my car starting, I based them on past truths. Now we would say that my faith was rational because of previous experience, but previous experience does not guarantee that things will work in the future; that is why faith is required. Faith often gets cast as the opposite of reason, but it contains quite a bit of reason. We make predictions about the future based on what happened in the past. And this is partially what Paul is telling us today and hopefully is helpful in understanding his whole point.

So, let’s go a little deeper and ask why we have faith in certain things and how that translates to our life in God. One reason for faith, as we just said, is experience, but there is more to it. Think about this example. Let’s say you are driving on the freeway heading to the airport. To accomplish this task, you need to get onto the 894 overpass. Now let’s say, just for the sake of argument, you have never been on that overpass before. When you are fifty feet up in the air you have a certain amount of faith that the roadway is not going to crack and that you are going to fall to a fiery death. Now, just because you have never been on this overpass before this does not mean that your faith is detached from reality. For one you know that, in your experience, other freeway overpasses have done what they are supposed to do. Second you know that freeway overpasses do not appear out of nowhere, but are built. And that building something like this requires a number of things. So, our faith expands. We have faith that the engineer who designed the overpass knew what they were doing. We also have faith that the construction company followed the instructions of the engineer and built the overpass to the correct specifications and met with the standards for correctly constructed overpasses. Furthermore, we probably also have a little faith in the concrete and the steel which make up the bridge. However, when all is said and done the bridge holds up not because of the faith we have in it but because of the engineering and the materials contained therein make it what it is. In other words, the overpass holds up whether we have faith in it or not. It is something that exists in and of itself. Which might make us wonder what is the point of faith if things go on whether we believe in them or not.

Well, let’s think about this question in terms of the faith Paul talks about today. The equation is basically that through our faith we receive the promise (i.e., salvation). But like the overpass our faith is not what makes this equation function. It works regardless of our belief. The great Elizabethan theologian Richard Hooker said, “God justifies the believer – not because of the worthiness of his belief, but because of Christ’s worthiness who is believed.” Jesus like the overpass, does all of the work. So where does that leave faith if it does not make salvation work? Let me try to explain.

I feel I may have already gone a little too far with my overpass metaphor but I am going to throw caution to the wind and keep going with it. Think for a moment about how our life would look if we had faith in the overpass versus if we did not. If we have faith we will easily and happily get onto 894 and head to the airport, but if not, we will be stuck on 94 and end up at Summerfest listening to the Red Hot Chili Pipers play *Fat Bottomed Girls* on the bagpipes. The same thing happens with faith in Christ. Yes, he does all the work but we still have to show up. Faith is often seen as sitting around thinking nice thoughts about Jesus but it is not so passive. If we have faith in God through Jesus Christ, we are able to participate in the life of God. We are able to move from the life of sin towards participation with the divine. It is about living the new life with Christ. The 20th century Anglican theologian John Stott explained it like this, “Christianity…is not in its essence a religion at all; it is a gospel, the gospel, good news that God’s grace has turned away his wrath, that God’s son has died our death and borne our judgement, that God has mercy on the undeserving, and there is nothing left for us to do, or even contribute. Faiths only function is to receive what grace offers.” In faith we receive God’s transforming love. We let God make us worthy because nothing in us can make us worthy.

Faith in God, like faith in taking the overpass, allows us to benefit from the work of others. Our faith does not save us in the sense that we can just sit around and think faithful thoughts, rather it saves us because we allow the work that God has done to work in us. I know I have used this example before but bear with me. C.S. Lewis once talked about a man who was a Christian who was a fairly nasty person. When someone points this out to a friend of his, the friend responds, “Yeah, but you should have seen him before.” Just as getting on the 894 overpass does not mean we have arrived at Mitchell our faith does not mean that everything will be perfect but it will move us farther along. It gives us that ability to journey closer to God. So, as we go through Lent my prayer for all of us is that when we come out people will be able to say of us, “Yeah, but you should have seen them before.”