Today, in our lectionary we have a lot of stuff about faith. In our first lesson we see the faith of Abram on display when he believes God’s promises about making him a great nation. Next, in the Epistle, we have Paul reflecting on that faith of Abram and its importance for our salvation and finally in the Gospel we have Jesus chiding Nicodemus about his lack of faith in what he has heard said about both earthly and heavenly things. And all of this faith talk is a bit of a problem for me, because I just spent six months with a bunch of Baptists who would not stop talking about faith, largely to the exclusion of everything else. However, despite my misgivings, I will dip my toe into the infinity pool of faith and reflect a bit about what it looks like in our modern context. And the two points I have to make are first about how we need faith and second about how we need to properly understand just what that faith is. And hopefully these points will tie together before we get through with this whole thing. Let’s start with our need for faith.

We live in very intellectually confused times and one of the ramifications of that confusion is that the term faith is often used pejoratively. Since faith does not have a well-defined meaning, in many circles it serves as a catchall for stuff those individuals do not like. Broadly speaking society writ large believes that reason is good and faith is bad. And I do not want to go deep into word meanings but simply want to point out that being a Christian, in any historically recognized sense, can be a bit hard in our modern era because of the hostility it encounters in the public square. Faith is to neither be seen nor heard. It’s like having a colonoscopy, people know that they happen they just do not want to hear about yours. Now this is not necessarily a new phenomenon. After all, in today’s Gospel lesson we have Nicodemus coming at night to see Jesus. From the timing of his visit, we can safely infer that he really did not want anyone in his social circle knowing what he was up to. And like Nicodemus we do and we will face pressure to not live our faith or to at least only live it in ways that our society deems acceptable. Some of this pressure may be overt. We might face pressure to renounce or deny our faith. However, I think most of the pressure will be less conspicuous, it will most likely take the form of distractions. Our society has thousands of things we can do instead of practicing our faith. As you have probably heard me say the biggest competitor to Sunday morning worship is Starbucks and children’s sports. Partaking in any of these activities is not necessarily a rejection of faith rather they are just saying that we would rather be doing something else. Practicing faith in our current context can be hard because faith can be seen as one type of entertainment option in a sea of many. And this is where I think we really need to be careful about how we understand our faith, which also happens to be my second point. Living in a society that pressures us with hostility or distraction there can be a temptation to redefine our faith to fit within these societal confines and the faith we create to fit within these constraints may be quite unrecognizable. In fact, it might not even be Christianity. Here is what I mean by that.

As clergy I often find myself the recipient of people’s half-baked musings on the divine. That is once people find out that I am a chaplain or Episcopal Priest they often want to give me the ground-breaking theory that they devised one day in the shower about how the whole universe works. The theories vary in the details but what they generally have in common are very low expectations of the individual explaining things and very high expectations of God. Here is an example: I recently had someone explain their version of Christianity to me and the crux of it was that they did not need to do any of the things we often associate with being a Christian like reading the Bible, going to Church, praying and so on instead they just needed to “live a good life.” Now I am all for living a good life, but this individual’s definition of what constituted a good life seemed to have been something along the lines of not having been Ted Bundy. And for this individual, God would just have to be content with that and give him his heavenly reward. And based on certain definitions of faith, this individual reached a reasonable conclusion. If faith is simply believing the correct things in the same way we believe that Neptune is the eighth planet from the sun then there is not much else to do. We freeze our correct views on God in amber and get on with doing the stuff we like to do. But look at how faith is described in Genesis. God promises Abram a bunch of stuff and then we read, “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.” The faith translated in action. Paul when describing what Abram did makes a very subtle distinction, which many have tried to make into a not-so-subtle distinction. And I want to take just a moment and reflect on this passage from Paul because I think it has been very misused, since at least the Reformation. Paul says, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.” Paul is making a point that the stuff Abram did was not what got him favor in God’s eyes but was rather his faith. Many take this and say see we don’t need to worry so much about the doing stuff, we just need to have the correct faith. But notice Paul never says any of that, he is simply pointing out where salvation comes from – it comes from faith. That is the starting point, not the end. Abram’s faith led him to want to do what God told him. Paul never says we are to have faith to the exclusion of following God’s will. If we say we have faith and have no desire to follow God in the way Abram did, I am not sure that we can call that faith. If I told you that I loved Amy but refused to pick her up when her car broke down in West Allis because there was a really good episode of *The Munster’s* on MeTV, you might rightly question the validity of my statement about my love. Faith and actions are two sides of the same coin. They cannot be portioned and separated.

The pressure that society puts on us to compromise our Christianity can lead to us leaning way too heavily on this point of Paul’s about faith and we end up putting together our own version of the faith that integrates seamlessly with the zeitgeist. But faith should be the first thing in our lives. It is not one activity in a sea of activities but is rather the alpha and omega. And in this season of Lent it might be a good time to think about our faith. Think about how we define it and think about how we live it. I doubt that many of us are tempted to reject our faith outright, but I think we are all tempted to make some compromises. To find a faith that is a little easier to hold in our modern context. But God makes a call on our entire lives so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.