

HOPE UNSEEN

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Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

We are nearing the end of this sermon series which has taken us through the book of Hebrews. I scheduled this seven-week series to conclude next Sunday on Christ the King Sunday. Christ the King Sunday is the final Sunday of the church's liturgical calendar. The week following marks the beginning of Advent—the first Sunday of the church year—and the cycle continues. We call the final Sunday Christ the King to acknowledge that through all the ups and down of the year, in the end, Jesus is our Christ and he reigns supreme. The book of Hebrews is a celebration of the exalted role of Jesus in God's plan for salvation. Jesus is the son of God; he is the great high priest; he is king.

The book of Hebrews is a sermon written to a struggling congregation in Rome. It was written the late first-century—forty to fifty years after Jesus' crucifixion. It seems that the commitment of the people in this congregation has been slipping for some time. Some have left the church and others are considering doing so. This book, this sermon, is an appeal to the congregation to rethink their understanding of who Jesus is, and what God promises in him. Jesus is more than they know. Jesus is more than a prophet, he is more than a holy man, he is more than a rabbi.

Through this sermon, the writer of Hebrews has shown how Jesus is the Son of God. He calls him the *pioneer and perfecter of our faith*. Not believing in Jesus poses certain dangers. The writer warns his people with these words: *Take care... that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart*. Then, you will recall how the writer also explores in depth the power of Jesus' priesthood and names him the great high priest.

In today's reading, we arrive at chapter 11 and the topic is faith. Faith, or the lack of it, has been a thread running through the book from the beginning. The writer begins today by offering us this two-part definition of faith: *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*.

All of us have our hopes for the future—hopes that we will be happy and loved, that our children will turn out okay, that our savings will last one day longer than we do. Our real hopes, however, should center on God. Our real hopes should be that God is always with us and we are with God, that we are walking the path that God has set for us, that God has a place for us, that God loves us. Hebrews is telling us that faith is the guarantee of the reality of God's place in our lives—*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for*.

The second half of the definition is that *faith is the conviction of things not seen*. This dovetails with the first half of the definition of faith. We hope in those things

we cannot prove. True faith is a belief and conviction in what we cannot see. My belief in God is based on my faith, not some proof of God's existence. I have faith that God is the creator of all things although I may not see God. Faith *is the conviction of things not seen*.

Then the writer of Hebrews reminds his people of all the heroes of the faith who have gone before, who have blazed a trail of belief through the wilderness of doubt. These heroes of the faith, these saints, are the ones who have gone before us, who did remarkable things because of their faith in God. Without faith, their actions seem foolish. With faith, their actions take on an amazing power.

Hebrews tells about Abel, the son of Adam and Eve, and Enoch, and Noah—all of whom displayed a level of faith above and beyond the norm. Think of the story of Noah building that giant boat when there was no water nearby. His neighbors thought he was crazy. Noah had faith even in the face of criticism and adversity.

But then Hebrews brings us Abraham and Sarah. The writer takes some time to remind us of the leaps of faith taken by this couple as they respond to God's. *By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place...not knowing where he was going*. By faith, Abraham remained in this land. But Abraham didn't settle in and build houses. He continued to live in tents—temporary homes. He knew this wasn't his final destination. Abraham was looking toward a different reality; he was looking for the city built by God.

And then there is delicate matter of offspring. *By faith, [Abraham and Sarah] received the power of procreation*. We know the story of how this couple are called by God and promised a wealth of descendants. Of course, when Sarah heard this news she broke out in laughter because neither she nor Abraham were young any more. They certainly weren't spring chickens. They weren't even fall or winter chickens. They were so old at this point they were more like fried chickens. And yet God is promising them children. Who wouldn't laugh at that? But they had faith. And Hebrews writes, *Therefore from one person* (actually, it takes two), *and this one as good as dead* (which is a pretty harsh way to describe this couple), *descendants were born*—descendants as numerous as *the stars of heaven* and *the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore*. Sarah gave birth to Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who was renamed Israel and was the father of twelve sons.

These are people who had faith, faith in God, faith in something hoped for and unseen.

The people in this congregation that Hebrews addresses are mostly Jews—the descendants of Sarah and Abraham. They are converts to Christianity. Their congregation is known as the Hebrews church. This is why this book is called “The Letter to the Hebrews.” These people would have been familiar with the stories of

Abel, and Enoch, and Noah, and Abraham and Sarah. They would have viewed them as paragons of faith.

But Hebrews is making the argument, that while these Old Testament heroes lived exemplary lives, they also died without receiving the great promise of faith. Hebrews tells us that they could see what they hoped for, but it was always just beyond their grasp. The city of God that they were seeking was unobtainable because Jesus was not there to close the distance and escort them in. As we read in Hebrews: *All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw.*

The writer is telling his people that through Christ, they have something their ancestors lacked. They have the ability to reach their promised land. Don't give up on the church; don't abandon your faith. Seek the *better country*; seek the city that God has prepared for you. That is the promise of salvation. That is what you hope for; that is what you cannot see. But it is there.

As Christians today, we also find that our faith can be weak. We demand proof; we demand results. We are drawn toward other realities that promise us so much—things we can see and touch, that make us feel good. The temptation is always there to do what the members of the Hebrew church did—just walk away and look for something better. But as the book asks, walk away to what? What is it that is out there that is better? Salvation comes only from the Lord.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Faith is work, but faith is also belief. Faith is trusting that God is there. We hope in God although we may not see God. Faith is living like Sarah and Abraham and Noah and countless others who follow God's call not knowing where it will lead them.

Living in faith is like walking down a long road. Where do we look? Do we just look down at our feet as we shuffle along? Or do we lift our eyes to what is ahead of us? Do we squint at the shapes out on the horizon? Do we climb a hill so that we may see even farther? Do we believe that God is walking with us? As we read in the Psalms: *I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth* (Ps 121).

This is faith—walking with God and trusting that God is there with us. Faith is looking for what God has planned for us. Faith is not shutting out the world but trying to see as far as we can. We can do this with the assurance that God is there. Amen.