

Heb. 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

## FAITH DEFINED

Over the years I've come to realize that language can be very imprecise. This is especially true when it comes to what we believe.

For example, what does it mean to have faith? I bet if you would ask ten people to give you a definition of faith, you would get ten different answers.

Today's lesson gives us the classic definition of faith. Some of you probably know it by heart. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.” What does that mean?

At first blush it sounds like faith is just wishful thinking. We have hope but our hope might not have any substance. We trust in something that we cannot see and hope for the best.

Some people do think of faith in that way. But, that is not biblical faith, and that is not what this passage teaches. The word translated “assurance” can also be translated “foundation” or “substance.”

So, faith is the “foundation” of hope. Faith gives “substance” to the hope that is our heart. So far, so good; but, its the next phrase in this definition of faith gives some of us a problem.

The author of Hebrews tells us, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, *the conviction of things not seen.*” But, you might rightly ask, “If we can’t see it, how can we know it is true? Isn’t this just blind faith?”

Actually, the answer to that question is found in the very next verse. Biblical faith is not blind faith. Biblical faith is based upon trust in the God who made heaven and earth. “The worlds were prepared by the Word of God ...” (Hebrews 11:3)

When we look at the universe in all its glory we see the power of God’s Word. The Bible tells us that God spoke and all that is came into existence.

Notice that the universe is not to be equated with God. Instead, the universe is the visible expression of the One who is above and beyond us. We cannot see God, but we can surely see the evidence of God’s good creation.

The Bible tells us that the “heavens are telling the glory of God.” (Psalm 19:1) No matter where we look we are looking at the handiwork of God. In God we live and move and have our being.

## THE EYES OF FAITH

But, we only believe that if we look at the world through the eyes of faith.

Faith is a matter of perception. Faith is looking at the world and the events of our life with a sense of wonder and hope. We look beyond the moment to the hope that is eternal.

We do this because we trust in the God who made heaven and earth. We trust in the promises of God to his people. We trust in God’s grace and love as revealed in his Son, Jesus.

We trust that God has a purpose and a plan for our life.

One last thing about faith; faith does not begin with us. Faith begins with God. God has the initiative when it comes to faith.

God chooses men and women to serve God’s purposes. The question asked of the faithful is this:

Are we going to go our own way and do our own thing or are we going to get with God’s program and do what God calls us to do?

This is the struggle of faith. This is the Divine drama that is played out in many different ways in the Bible.

And this is the Divine drama that is played out in our own lives as well.

One size does not fit all when it comes to faith. Faith is a unique journey, and it includes not only the successes of our life but also the failures of our life.

Some have referred to the people mentioned in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews as the heroes of faith. I think that title is misleading. When I think of heroes I think of people who are stronger and braver than I.

But, that's not the story of the Bible.

In the Bible the people who come to faith, the people who learn to trust God definitely have feet of clay. They struggle to believe in the promises of God and make sense of life.

They have families that are dysfunctional.  
They often make the wrong choice.  
They are just as likely to be cowardly as courageous.

They are afraid that they will die without having done anything significant. They are afraid that when they are gone no one to remember them or care about them.

I identify with people like that.  
I have the same kind of struggles.  
And I bet you do too.

But, the good news is this:

If people like this can come to faith, if people like this can learn to trust God through the twists and turns of their life, then perhaps there's hope for you and me.

Perhaps we can learn to have faith as well.

## ABRAHAM

Our lesson for today emphasizes the faith journey of Abraham. The faith of Abraham began when God chose him. God called Abraham to go on a journey to the Promised Land.

But, the odd thing is that God did not give Abraham a road map. Abraham does not know where he is going.

Abraham trusts God to be his guide. Abraham believes that one day God will lead him home. And it is this trust, this willingness to go on a trip without a roadmap that is the essence of faith.

And yet while he was on that journey Abraham was, from time to time, given signs of the promise.

God told Abraham that from him would come a great nation. His ancestors would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand by the seashore.

There was just one tiny problem. Abraham was an old man, and his wife was no spring chicken either. In fact our Scripture for today tells us that this old couple was “as good as dead.” They weren’t dead yet, but they were close.

And it’s at this point that God decides to inject a little levity into the journey. God tells this old couple that they’re going to have a child.

And what do they do? They laugh. “That’s a good one God. We’re going to have a child.”

But, of course, God has the last laugh. God always does.

Old Sarah has that child, and do you know what they named him? Isaac, which means, “to laugh.”

But, now they didn’t laugh out of cynicism and unbelief. Now they laughed out of joy and faith. Isaac was a miracle baby.

The birth of Isaac was about more than just the good fortune of an old couple long ago.

The birth of Isaac was a sign, a harbinger of God’s grace to come.

God would be known as the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God who makes all things possible.

## THE STORY CONTINUES

God was the one who interrupted our grim world with laughter and joy and a sign of salvation. And that story would continue.

God’s people retold the story of Abraham and his family because it had become their story. In this story of journey and struggle and laughter and salvation, God’s people saw a reflection of their own lives. And this gave them hope for the living of their days

This is still true. In the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we see a reflection of our own story.

Abraham is our father in the faith. And the Bible points us toward a future filled with incredible laughter and life, life that is eternal.

We see the glory of God in creation. We read about how God has delivered His people in the past. We remember how God has delivered us in the past. And this is what encourages us on our unique journey of faith.

The journey of Abraham never ended. All his life he was a nomad. This was true not only of Abraham but also of his son, Isaac and his grandson, Jacob.

The family stayed on the move for generations. They lived a transient life. They spent all their years in tents.

And here's the interesting point. They were already in the Promised Land for most of their journey. They just didn't know it. They lived as strangers in the place that God's people would one day call home.

We too live in the Promised Land. We might not know it, but it's true. We live our lives under the promises of God. God is good and God is gracious. And God is with us every step of the way.

## NEW CREATION

Like Abraham and Sarah we sometimes might be tempted to think that we are "as good as dead." But, God continues to call new life out of us. In fact Paul in his letter to the Romans connects the story of Abraham and Sarah's miraculous birth with the hope of the resurrection.

Paul said that when he made Abraham the father of many nations through the miraculous birth of Isaac, God was demonstrating that He gives "life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

The birth of Isaac was about more than Abraham and his family. It was the first instance of the Word becoming flesh. It was a word of grace and hope for all people.

The new creation began in father Abraham and continues in all those who share Abraham's faith. (See Romans 4:16-25) Abraham trusted in God's Word, in God's promises, and it was this faith that brought him salvation.

And Paul wrote that in the same way, we too come to faith. Through life's triumphs and tragedies, we learn to trust the promises of God.

But, unlike Abraham and all the other saints of the Hebrew Bible, we have received a greater promise. In Jesus we know the grace of God in a more complete way. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven, and we are freed to live a new kind of life. We live a life free from the shackles of sin and guilt.

The invisible work of the new creation becomes visible in Jesus. And through the grace of God, the invisible work of the new creation becomes visible in us as well.

One of the most common phrases in the New Testament is “in Christ.” This phrase means that we have received the Spirit of God in Christ.

Faith is a miracle. And faith becomes the lens through which we view the world. Faith changes our perception and our approach to life.

In a world filled with despair, we see hope. In a world filled with anger and violence we preach a message of peace and reconciliation.

Don't misunderstand. We know that the world is a harsh place. We know that our lives are not what they should be.

But, like Abraham we are on a journey of faith. We seek a new homeland. Through the eyes of faith we see a new world coming.

And we refuse to be distracted by the old way of life.

## LEAVING THE OLD LIFE BEHIND

There is one thing that Abraham and all the other saints of old did not do. They did not turn around and go back home.

They might have struggled. They might have been disappointed.

But, they continued to move forward and look forward because they trusted God for their future. They never tried to go back to their old home. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

They looked forward to that city with foundations, whose builder and architect was God. (Hebrews 11:10)

This is what made them examples of faith.

Do you remember the Old Testament story of Lot's wife?

Her family was rescued from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but she could not leave the old way of life behind. The angels told them not to look back, but she disobeyed.

She looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt.

That story teaches us that when God leads us on the journey of faith the one thing we cannot do is go back to the old way of life.

We have to continue on the journey to the place that God will show us. Once we start this journey, we cannot look back. That can only bring us heartache and destruction.

## ETERNITY IN OUR HEARTS

Instead, like Abraham we seek the Promised Land. We seek the New Jerusalem that comes down from heaven. We are on the lookout for the new creation.

And we perceive this new heaven and new earth through the eyes of faith. We believe that the God who created this world is recreating this world.

And we are a part of that new creation.

It's this vision that guides us every step of the way. We believe in the hope that God's kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

William Wordsworth put it beautifully in one of his poems when he said, "Our souls have sight of that immortal sea."

I believe that is profoundly true. God has placed eternity in our hearts.

And it is the call of the eternal that beckons us to go forward. It is the call of the eternal that cause us to take the next step ... even though we cannot know where the path will lead.

Talk of a heavenly home has been out of fashion in some theological circles these days. But, this has always been a big part of the biblical story.

The Bible would have us focus our attention on the things that are above and not on the things that are below. (Colossians 3:1-2)

Sometimes the kind of person we are is determined by the goals we set. If our goals are too low, we are invariably less than we should be.

The goal of the faithful is none other than the kingdom of God.

Yes, that does represent a hope that is in the future. Yes, that does represent a hope that we cannot grasp on our own.

But, when we set our minds upon that future, heavenly hope, our life today becomes better.

In this way we learn to walk by faith and not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

We learn to stand on the promises and trust that underneath are the everlasting arms. (Deuteronomy 33:27 KJV)

## GOD CATCHES US

The late Henri Nouwen told of going to see a trapeze group. He was mesmerized by their breath-taking performance as they flew gracefully through the air.

At the end of the show he spoke with the leader of the group and asked how he was able to perform with such grace and ease so high in the air. The leader responded,

“The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything.

When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and wait for him to catch me.

The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher. I’m not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me.”

When trouble comes, we often try to grab on to God.

We think that if we can just pray harder or promise to live better that we can somehow catch a blessing. That’s the worst thing we can do. That’s not our job.

And quite often our desperate efforts to save ourselves get in the way of faithful living.

It’s not our job to catch God. It’s God’s job to catch us. Today I invite you to let go and let God.

I invite you to trust in the everlasting arms that will catch you when you fall. I invite you to put your hand in the hand of the One who will lead you all the way home.

Amen.