

Faith

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Do you realize that we are roughly midway between Easter/Pentecost and Christmas/Epiphany, often seem a time of spiritual laziness in churches in the Northern Hemisphere. This is our time for vacations and back to school shopping, just getting ready for the next phase of our year. We often tempted to believe that faith is not important and that everything that happens is an effect of our actions. Often we are encouraged to doubt by the world around us that discounts that God is the one that created and sustains the world in which we live. We are tempted to believe that if something cannot be reproduced by science it is not a valid thing in which to believe. However, the life situation of the readers addressed by Hebrews was considerably more threatening and frightening. Some in the Hebrew congregation were facing martyrdom (12:4), some had already been subjected to prison and their property been taken, and most had experienced hostility, ridicule, and shame, simply because following Jesus, a crucified savior, set them at odds with the surrounding culture (10:32-39). The writer of Hebrews was encouraging them to remain steadfast, to persevere through difficult days.

The unknown author of Hebrews approaches the audience through their experience of faith. The writer had already reminded the readers that the once-for-all nature of Jesus' sacrifice should strengthen their confidence in the realities of faith, hope, and love, sufficient to continue hope and provoke each other to deeds of love. In chapter 10 the writing has warned them of the judgment that awaits those who have rejected the Lord Jesus Christ (10:26-31) and recalled earlier occasions of persecution when the congregation persevered by mutually supporting each other. In chapter 11, the author explores other dimensions of faith: the Hebrews are reminded that what they hope for is intimately connected to their experience of faith; "the assurance of things hoped for;" and that they should not expect their faith, "the conviction of things not seen;" to be supported by the surrounding culture (v. 1). The writer

assures them that God will commend their faithfulness (v. 2) and then begins a litany of heroes who have embodied faith even in the face of disappointment.

Faith is a multifaceted reality, with strange, even contradictory features. Faith is at the same time the gift of God's unconditional love and a human response of trust and gratitude that issues in deeds of love and justice. Faith is a way of knowing that constantly seeks understanding about God, Jesus, creation, sin, salvation, and human destiny. Faith is often presented as that which enables one to cope with the trials and tribulations of life. But, faith is also that which has provoked the hostility and ridicule being heaped upon this Hebrew Christian community.

Despite the statement that faith is not sight, it can be helpful to think of faith as a kind of seeing. Many come to faith, for example, by "seeing" something compelling in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus or in the communal life of Jesus' followers. Faith, then, is the perception that the way of Jesus is the way to become who I most truly am, a creature in the image of God. Faith includes the awareness that the meaning of life is not to be found in the accumulation of wealth, power, and privilege, but in loving God and neighbor. The "way" of Jesus puts one at odds with the dominant social script, which usually does see the meaning of life in the accumulation of worldly goods.

When faith leads an individual or group to challenge the values of the dominant culture, people are often marginalized and excluded from positions of power and privilege. They may even be regarded as subhuman and thus legitimate targets of hostility, ridicule, and economic discrimination. The refusal of the Christians to worship Caesar or the Roman gods, for example, and their worship of a crucified savior, executed as a traitor to the empire, must have seemed utterly foolish and even subversive to those steeped in worldly wisdom. The struggle becomes a constant daily effort to sustain an alternative vision amid hostility and ridicule. Here faith presents itself as courage. It is hard for American Christians in the 21st century, who find ourselves relatively affluent and holding positions of power and privilege in the dominant culture, to truly identify with the plight of the community of Hebrews. So we need to ask ourselves is there a difference between being an American and being a Christian?

Maybe we are the powerful, but what is God calling us to do in faith to lift up our brothers and sisters and those who are powerless and marginalized. Sometimes the scripture is not tell us to take courage, but to encourage others in their faith.

The recitation of persons and events from the past suggests that faith is not adequately defined by a single individual or community. Faith must be seen in terms of a larger story that reaches back at least to Abraham, who trusted the promises of God and left his home in Ur without knowing exactly where he was going. None of these ancestors received fully the promise that had been offered. They remained strangers and foreigners, sojourners and pilgrims, even in the land of promise. They died in faith without seeing the promise fulfilled.

The promise that the writer of Hebrews holds forth is more than simply a matter of going to heaven when we die; but it is also a "homeland," a place where we can be fully at home, free of the conflicts and contradictions that beset our present existence. Drawing upon images from Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God, we can imagine a community of worship, deep friendships between former enemies, a banquet table open to all persons. Because faith reaches beyond death, it often invades the present through hope, enabling us to see the wondrous beauty already here and inspiring new possibilities for this earthly existence. So faith renews the courage of hope and enables the faithful to live freely and meaningfully in this beautiful but dangerous world. (**John C. Shelley**)

It is by God's grace, through faith, that we receive salvation. Faith in God is what keeps us going in the face of life's challenges.

In Greek mythology, Pistis was one of the spirits who escaped Pandora's box and fled back to heaven, abandoning humanity. The book of Hebrews was written partly to combat this idea and to encourage Christians who were having trouble holding onto hope when Christ did not return immediately after his resurrection. The writer of the book of Hebrews gives us a valuable definition of faith/pistis, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

You and I all hope for things, yearn for things, and in faith ask God for things. Sometimes our prayers are answered. Children are born. They get the job. The treatment works.

Sometimes things take longer, and like the audience of the book of Hebrews who were waiting for Christ's return, we are still waiting for an answer from God.

In the Old Testament, Abraham and Sarah also waited a long time for an answer from God. They struggled to have children. Abraham obeyed God and stayed true to God so much that he followed God without knowing where God was leading.

It is difficult to follow God when we are not sure where God is leading. When we do not see evidence of action, we begin to wonder whether God is watching over us. We hope that God is watching. We see loved ones grow ill and pray in faith that God will hold their future. Then every once in awhile something positive happens in our faith, something special that restores our conviction, strengthens our hearts, and reminds us why we believe what we believe.

Faith matters. Our faith gives assurance that God has our best interests at heart, knows what we hope for, and holds our future.

We can hope, but in faith we often have to trust God and other people with our future and find our assurance outside ourselves. We have to have faith that, as the author of Hebrews writes, God has prepared a better place, a "heavenly one," for us, as God prepared for Abraham.

Faith is also "the conviction of things not seen." The Greek word for conviction implies an objective side of faith. It is the proof beyond a reasonable doubt that there is something worth believing in.

Believing in something is what faith is about. Our faith is a gift of God's grace. It comes through God's reaching out through the Holy Spirit to allow us to trust Jesus for salvation.

Two centuries ago, in the Age of Reason, when most people lived on farms, made their own clothes, and raised their own food, perhaps one could be an island. Today, however, we have to have faith in the people around us. We have to trust the food prepared at the

restaurant, trust the pilot of the airplane, and trust the caregiver at the day care. That is something that many of us struggle with.

We cannot watch every part of our own lives and those we love. Fortunately, we do not have to, for we know from Scripture and the Holy Spirit that God is watching over us. What gives our faith a firm foundation is that Jesus Christ is Lord and holds our future, come what may on earth. Faith is ultimately a gift of the Holy Spirit. Our opportunity is to respond to God's initiative of such grace. **(David E. Gray)**

A few weeks ago I ordered my usual number of Christmas gifts for the congregation...who wants to guess what the nature of the gifts will be? Anyway because I did not receive a confirmation of my order I put in the order a second time and both orders came. Leroy asked if I was going to send the second order back but my faith says that in the remainder of the year we will minister to twice as many people as we usually do. In the next few weeks we will have meetings with the membership and outreach committee and the Christian education committee and discuss ways of reaching out to more people, young and mature and in-between to share the love of God and our faith with those we meet. Our faith is not just about the sweet by and by, but how we live out that faith each and every day. I welcome all of us to participate in the journey of faith together as we serve God. Amen.

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