

**"The Assurance of Things Hoped For"**  
**A Sermon for South Parish Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Augusta, Maine**  
**Sunday, November 26, 2017**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3**

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith, our ancestors received approval. 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." Hebrews 11:1-3

Will you pray with me. Eternal One, you call us to gather to hear your word, to ponder your wisdom, to live out your hopes for us this day. Be among us as we put aside our early holiday "to do" lists for a bit and focus on *your Spirit* as it is reflected in *our lives* each moment.... whether we are aware of it or not. Amen.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.... By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen is made from things that are not visible." (Heb 11:1-3) I first read those words from the Letter of Hebrews in the New Testament when I was standing in my father's hospital room in Sarasota, Florida in 1990. I won't go into all the details, but it was around dusk, my father was either sleeping or sedated, and I looked up at the closet door at the end of his roommate's bed. The poster hanging there were these words of Hebrews 11:1-3. I'd never read them before, but I somehow knew they were from the Bible. I wouldn't have known if it was the Old Testament or the New Testament, as I was not a churchgoer, and never did this "religious thing" in my adult life up to that point.

But for some unknown or "spiritual" reason.... I read those words and they made sense to me.... They spoke to me as no words had ever spoken to me before. Without knowing the context of their meaning two thousand years ago for their first hearers and readers, they gave *me* this realization:

I didn't have to prove that Moses physically witnessed a ball of fire actually coming out of a burning bush long ago.

I didn't need to believe that Charleton Heston really parted the Red Sea in the movie "The Ten Commandments."

I didn't need to PROVE anything about God or spirituality in order to be a person of faith. I just had to hope.... Faith is the "assurance of things hoped for." Suddenly, out of the blue, on a closet wall in a hospital room in Sarasota, Florida in 1990, an amazing and totally unexpected flash of sacred insight and spiritual awakening came over me....

Now some traditional Christians might say this was the point of my "conversion" to becoming a Christian. I wouldn't call it a conversion, but more of a realization that God, or the Holy Spirit, or simply "something" beyond my comprehension had been hanging around in my life the whole time. I just didn't know it. As Jacob exclaimed in the story of his dream of a ladder going up to heaven in Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures, "Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it." (Gen 28:16) Surely, God was in my life, and I did not know it.

My secretary in the late 1980's, who was a good and faithful Catholic woman who went to Mass every morning before she came to work, said to me one day "out of the blue," as it were, "Susan, faith is just a matter of paying attention." Not being involved in any faith or spiritual practice of any kind at that time in my life, I just nodded my head and smiled. I imagine what I

was thinking, but didn't say was, "WHATever".... until I read the words of Hebrews 11:1-3 some three or four years later in my father's hospital room..... Faith is just a matter of paying attention," Theresa said to me. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," the writer of Hebrews proclaimed. Faith is recognizing on a daily basis, sometimes on a moment-by-moment basis, that *we* are not all there is.... there is "more."

There's much more to my personal spiritual story that you don't need to know now.... and I didn't end my career as a financial planner for American Express until four years later when I entered seminary in Bangor to begin study for my Master of Divinity degree. But Hebrews 11:1-3 is never far from my consciousness, or my appreciation for spirituality however it might reveal itself to me.....

Spirituality.... It's hard to come by in "organized religion" sometimes..... don't you think? Sometimes we get so "organized" that we miss the sense of the Spirit that is all around us. I wish I had a nickel, ok, maybe a quarter, for every time someone said to me in 18 1/2 years of ministry, "Susan, I'm spiritual, but not religious. I don't do 'organized religion,' but if I did, I'd come to YOUR church!" My response to that statement was always, "Well, then you need to come visit us in Lincolnville because we're about as unorganized as you can get!" Not really, but it always caught the person's attention when I said that. But honestly, don't we sometimes lose our sense of what it means to be "spiritual" when we get so focused on church rules, regulations, guidelines, bylaws, committee meetings, blaugh, blaugh, blaugh.... that we become just too tired or bored to think about what it means to say we are *spiritual* beings, and perhaps sometimes, *not all that religious*?"

On this Reign of Christ Sunday -- the Christian Sunday that bridges "ordinary time" to "Advent," should we focus on the Christian teaching that Jesus is still going to return, for the "second coming"..... or should we begin to focus more on the first coming and going of Christ.... and do whatever we can to live out Christ right here, right now, not back then, or down the road..... do we focus so much on past and future that we miss the moment of RIGHT NOW..... the moment of spiritual reality right now....

With all the chaos in the world and in our country.... religiously.... politically.... socially.... isn't it appropriate that we check in with our sense of what is holy, spiritual, divine? For many of us, that's the purpose of coming to church each Sunday -- to "check in" with God, with Jesus, with one another when the days in between Sundays are filled with so much that doesn't seem spiritually based at all.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was speaking to a group of early Christians who were "second generation" believers in Jesus as the Christ. Some had become lax in their attendance at services, their commitment to Christ seeming to wane. To put today's words to the situation, there was a crisis in the faith community.... not so much different from today's world, is it?

Where is your sense of spirituality coming from RIGHT NOW in the midst of all the chaos that surrounds us every day?

Not when you were a child and perhaps attending Sunday School.....

Not in worrying about whether you're "good enough" to get in to that sanctuary in the sky, heaven, or whatever you choose to call that space, that thin place, that beckons us when we've taken our last breath on this earth?

Where is your sense of spirituality RIGHT NOW? Perhaps it comes as you sing the hymns in this wonderful sanctuary under Virgil's fine leadership with the fine notes being played by your organist, Jay, to bring you along....

or hear the wise words of the children or your preacher's sermons.

Perhaps it comes in your volunteer actions as you offer sustenance of many kinds to those in your community who need your help.

Perhaps it comes as you open yourselves up to the wonders of nature. For me, birds are an incredible link to the sacred, the holy, the spiritual in my life. And places hold sacred meaning, like the one in the photo on the front of your bulletins. I took this one in Ogunquit several weeks ago. It is one of my favorite places in Maine.

Perhaps your sense of spirituality comes in reading -- the sacred scriptures, or other words of wisdom, or novels that reveal much more of the holy than the daily news, or in poetry that opens up new meaning in old realities.

Perhaps your sense of spirituality comes in having deeply meaningful conversation with a friend, or maybe even a stranger.

Ministry -- your ministry, my ministry, Jesus' ministry -- is about extending invitations into the holy, the spirituality of life itself.... invitations to enter into the experience of the presence of God and to have the faith that someone will greet us at the door if we choose to go through it.

Ministry, for me, is about the invitation to new beginnings and better relationships which result from the ever growing awareness of the presence of God in our lives. As "God remembered Noah," in Genesis (Gen 8:1), God remembers each one of us and reminds us each morning that every day is a new beginning. The task, each day, if we choose to take it up, is to decide what use to make of that new beginning.

In ministry, my call -- my chosen challenge -- is to *be present* to those who seek a new beginning each day and who acknowledge they would like help with the directions. My sacred task is to remind them that faith *is* the assurance of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen.

I'm convinced we are all ministers of one sort or another. We are all spiritual beings seeking something beyond ourselves. Here's the question I leave with you today: What invitation to a life of spiritual wonder do you want to offer to others this day?

In the words of Henri Frederic Amiel, written almost two centuries ago, "Life is short. We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make the journey with us. So be swift to love. Make haste to be kind." And may the Creator who made us all, Jesus who beckons each of us to a rich life, and the Spirit that hovers over and around us no matter what befalls us, be with each of you this day. Faith *is* the assurance of things hoped for.... May it be so in your life.

Let the people say, "Amen!"