

“By faith...”
A Sermon for the Federated Church in Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, August 11, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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....

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. **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. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. **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. 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.”

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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 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.
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Will you pray with me. Faith-giving God, remind us this day of the assurance of your presence among us. Affirm for us that faith is not blind, nor is it easy to maintain. We live in a world that seeks proof and rejects the mystery we can never fully understand. Teach us that faith is our journey forward with you, as you led Abraham and so many others forward. Even though we might not have any idea where you are leading us, help us to follow you this day. Amen.

If I hadn't accidentally read the first three verses of our passage from Hebrews this morning in the late summer of 1990, I might not be with you today. For my reading of those verses, twenty-nine years ago, began a whole series of events that led to my eventually going into ministry. I've already shared some of this story with you.

I was standing in my father's hospital room in the early evening in Sarasota, FL. He was not awake, nor was his roommate, who was a young man who had been severely injured in a fight. Both my father and this young man had head injuries from severe physical trauma. My father had tripped over a garbage can lid and fell and hit his head on the back of my parents' car and then on the garage floor of their home in Sun City Center, Florida on Memorial Day of 1990. That day was the beginning of my father's ending nine months later.

Over his roommate's bed in that hospital room in Sarasota was a poster with the words of Hebrews 11:1-3 beautifully written. “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.”

I had never read those words before, not having been much of a church goer or Bible reader up to that point in my life. I knew Hebrews was a book in the Bible, but I didn't know if it was in the Old Testament or the New Testament. But somehow, for some reason unknown to me at the time, those words made sense to me without my needing to know their context or their original meaning to those who first heard and read them.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Those words and their sentiment about faith are timeless. The author of Hebrews may have been writing to a group of early followers of Jesus who were being persecuted for their new beliefs and who were wavering in their newly found religious feelings. He was probably trying to give them a much needed pep talk, a sermon of encouragement so they wouldn't be tempted to backslide into old habits and ways of living without Jesus as their guide – especially since he did not return immediately after his resurrection, as they had hoped and expected.

But it seems to me the words can have even much greater meaning for us than their original author probably intended.

They go to the heart of anyone, each one of us, who has lost something or someone – lost jobs, lost youth, lost good health, lost relationships, lost loved ones to death.

They go to the heart of anyone who has begun to lose hope, and to the head of anyone for whom whatever isn't seen literally, in the flesh, is not real.

“Faith is the ASSURANCE of things HOPED FOR, the CONVICTION of things NOT seen.”

When I first read those words in my father's hospital room, what they said to me, regardless of what their original intention was, was that I didn't have to literally believe that Charlton Heston parted the waters of the Red Sea, as it is portrayed in the movie “The Ten Commandments.”

I didn't have to literally believe that fire came out of a burning bush before Moses in order to be a person of faith.

I didn't have to take as literal truth so many things written in the Bible that just didn't make logical sense to me. I could be a person of faith AND have doubts and questions and concerns all at the same time.

I realized in the flash of a moment that faith is not certainty, faith is not logical sense, faith is not proof, faith is not a guarantee – faith is a promise. Faith is hope.

Faith is a promise that God will be with us, no matter what happens or doesn't happen, no matter whether we are sick or well, no matter whether we are young or old, no matter whether we live or die.

Our faith is God's promise that all *will* be well, later, if not sooner.

Our faith is God's promise that we can survive any tragedy, any loss, any disappointment for one reason -- because so many in our sacred history have done so before us.

The writer of Hebrews begins back at the very beginning of our sacred history with Abel and Cain and Enoch and Noah and then Abraham and Sarah, barren into their old age, yet promised by God that they would bear a son when that would seem impossible.

The most revealing and comforting aspect, to me, of this passage is not that faith is a promise that will always be fulfilled in *this* life. Faith is a promise that might not be fulfilled until the *next* life. In other words, we don't always get what we want in this life. Our prayers that a friend's illness, or even our own, might be cured sometimes seem not to be answered. Our prayers that a loved one might not die are sometimes not answered to our liking.

Yet, God promises something beyond THIS life. God promises something more than just living through this day. The writer of Hebrews says, "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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 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, God has prepared a city for them." (Heb 10:13-16)

Faith IS the assurance of things hoped for – for me, what I hope for most is to be with my mother and father, and now my brother, Butch, too, again one day in that homeland, that better country, that is a heavenly one. Perhaps you share that hope as you think of those who have so recently moved on toward that homeland with God.

I think of so many in the church family I pastored for eighteen years in Lincolnville who have gone on. I know you think of those you've lost in this church family who have gone from your sight and left each of you with the task of holding on, supporting one another, doing what you can to carry out Jesus' command to love God and to love your neighbors, all of them, with all the faith and hope you can muster.

Faith is the CONVICTION of things not seen. If we take as truth only those things that can be proven scientifically, we have missed a whole world of mystery and what is truly holy in life and in death. To be convicted of something means that we hold firmly to it. To be convicted means that we have a confidence in something greater than we are, something that is not only out of our control but beyond our control.

The King James translation of the first verse in our passage for today goes, "Now faith is the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen." (Heb 11:1) Substance or assurance, evidence or conviction – these words all point to a foundation of faith and understanding that is rock solid, even when *we* stumble, even when we *refuse* to give over our little power and control to a greater power and control beyond our limited and limiting knowledge without understanding.

For knowledge and understanding are not the same thing. I can have a lot of knowledge about many things. I can have a number of letters behind my name designating lots of academic degrees I've earned. But having knowledge in my head doesn't necessarily mean I have any understanding at all in my heart about what is really

important in life. I can have hope with or without knowledge. I can have hope with or without understanding – because faith is the assurance, the substance, of things hoped for.

To have hope is to live in grateful expectation of good things to come, better days and a final destination that is beyond all our dreaming.

To have hope is to be convicted, convinced, having evidenced that *God*, not any of us, is in charge of all things so that what is seen is made from things that are not visible.

We do not have to solve all the world's problems all by ourselves. We have help in that effort, if only we ask for it.

We need not grieve in sadness for those who have gone on, for they are o.k., taken into God's care in their deaths in ways that support but also go beyond any degree of care we might have given them in their lives.

We need only to *live in hope* and *have faith in the assurances* of God. But as you've heard me say before, we have a choice to make. We can choose to live in despair and with cynicism and doubt about all the chaos and dissention surrounding us at this point in our history..... Or we can choose to live in hope and with faith in the assurances of God, while we each do our part to help make our country and the world more hospitable. I would rather choose to live in the latter way. How about you?

Louisa May Alcott, well known nineteenth century author, wrote "Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead." May we choose to do the same in the days to come. Amen.