

# Faith

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**Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

“By faith...”

In today’s text, “by faith” is the preacher’s hook. If we read the whole of chapter 11 in Hebrews, we would hear these words seventeen times as the preacher lifts up the faithfulness of Abel and Enoch, of Noah; of Abraham and Sarah; Isaac, and Jacob, of Joseph; and the faith of Moses and Rahab. The preacher even sends up the wish for more time noting that there are so many left to admire; Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel; and all the prophets and martyrs.

The preacher will call these individuals a “great cloud of witnesses” and will urge that first century Christian community to emulate their faithful example as they endure the troubles coming their way. Because trouble was definitely coming their way. As John Shelley phrased it, following “a crucified savior, set them at odds with the surrounding culture...”<sup>1</sup>

In those days the Christian church faced marginalization, ridicule and shame. Its members were subject to state-sanctioned persecution, unjust imprisonment, even death. Even more disheartening—they were growing old and dying while waiting on the promise that Jesus Christ would return bringing the fulfillment of God’s reign on earth.

In the face of these troubles, the preacher tells them to persevere by faith. Just one more thing for their pagan neighbors to ridicule. People in the Hellenized world knew the story, when Pandora’s box was opened, Pistis—the Greek spirit of truth and good faith—escaped the world and fled to the heavens.

How does one say “press onward by faith” to a culture that believes faith has left the building? Looking to our culture today, we might also ask *How does one live by faith today?*

Nonetheless, the preacher presses on, beginning by defining faith—it’s a wonderful sound bite—“faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Let me share this, that no matter how useful this phrase was my theology exams, the English translation of “assurance” and “conviction” falls flat. These words make faith seem like an intellectual proposition that one assents to with one’s head. Yet the Greek bears out Kimberly Baker’s declaration that “Faith is much more than a doctrinal statement...”<sup>2</sup> It “is active; it does something. It hopes; it obeys; it moves out in trust.”<sup>3</sup>

It is the New Jerusalem translation that captures this depth of active faith, saying: “Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that are unseen. It is for their faith that our ancestors are acknowledged” (Heb 11:1-2 NJB).

And so, for the next 38 verses, the preacher continues to praise a faith that is embodied in the lives of the faithful.

In his work on Hebrews, John Shelly speaks of how the letter defines faith as “a multifaceted reality... the gift of God’s unconditional love *and* a human response of trust and gratitude that issues in deeds of love and justice...”<sup>4</sup> Today’s text shouts to us, “Look what faith has done!” even as it encourages us to imagine what our faith might yet do.

Faith allowed Abraham and Sarah to hear and respond to God’s call, to set out on a lifelong journey of faith—leaving their home in Ur for an unknown destination, trusting God to show them the way. It allowed the couple to hold on to the promise that God would give them, first a child and then, descendants outnumbering the stars; holding on even as Sarah struggled with barrenness and Abraham grew impotent with age. It allowed Abraham and Sarah to live with their noses pressed against the window pane of promise—settling as pilgrims in their promised land when all they would ever possess of it would be their family burial plot in the cave of Machpelah.

Faith allowed Abraham and Sarah to hold on to God’s promise knowing they would not see the promise unfold. Sarah dying before her son Isaac was married. Abraham dying before Isaac’s twin sons were born. It allowed Abraham and Sarah to live as those blessed by God, continually hoping in God’s promise that the entire world would become blessed through their descendants.

Today, their journey is our witness...

At Third Church, when we receive new members, we share our “faith journeys”— short sketches of how we came to be Christian and how we made our way to this particular community of faith. These are the journeys that shape our lives. Each story is different, but there is a theme. Some come to this city to pursue education or employment, or to be with family; others have grown up here. Yet, we all come seeking a place of connection:

- connection with God and with others who share our faith;
- connection to different ways of living for the sake of the world;
- connection that makes of this place a place of belonging.

We journey toward that better country, that new homeland, seeking to live in a place planned and planted and shaped by God that at its very best will become a foreshadowing of the kingdom of heaven. We desire to live by faith, to live out the reality of the things we hope for...

There are some who hear this passage from Hebrews and would use it to promote a faith that is not interested in this world, but only the next. Who imagine that our Christian journey is merely about making our way into heaven as we die. But the preacher himself calls us to remember that it is: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by God’s own living word...” In other words, this world matters because it is God’s world.

So, even as we are bombarded by troubling headlines and diminished by the ills of our time, we are invited to join the Hebrews to imagine the possibilities of faith unleashed into the tension of difficult times along with Abraham and Sarah and the whole cloud of witnesses.

I think that the preacher of Hebrews was concerned that we might find such shining examples of faithfulness a little discouraging—after all how can we measure up to them? Yet, we are invited to know the whole of the story—to know that these luminaries whose faithfulness he shares are all wonderfully imperfect people.

We know that Abraham and Sarah had moments of doubt—moments when they trusted in their own schemes more than they trusted in God’s power to deliver on God’s promises. If we look carefully at the list, all of them had their faults. Rahab was a foreign prostitute. Barak was an unwilling general who needing his commander Deborah’s presence beside him in battle. Samson was deceived by Delilah and lost his God-given gift of strength.<sup>5</sup>

Yet even in their imperfection, we find faith.

Kim Baker proclaims:

“Faith like Rahab's means knowing we are accepted by God and can help to bring [Jerico's] walls down even when the world continues to condemn us. Faith like Barak's is true faith even if at times we need someone to go with us for support. To have faith like Samson is to continue to be faithful to our calling even if we find that we have misused our gifts....

“Faith is hearing God's promise and then living as if it is already a reality. Faith is moving into the Promised Land even if you must live there in tents... Faith is standing strong even as you are put to death. Faith is living with the promise even while you are in exile. Faith is believing the Reign of God has come near even while all the world around you is in chaos.”<sup>6</sup>

Week to week, we mark the births and the deaths in this congregation by placing roses in the chancel. As we do so, we speak of our assurance that in life and in death we belong to God and we remember the promise—the promise into which we are born and into which we die—that nothing in life or in death is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Abraham and Sarah were promised descendants that would outnumber the stars. We are promised God’s steadfast love without end. And so, the litany rises softly:

By faith, we are able to love and trust God even when we face loss and rejection, illness and death, because we have hope in the promise that God loves and cares for us in this life and in the next.

By faith, we can perceive that “the way of Jesus is the way to become who [we] most truly [are]... creature[s] in the image of God...”<sup>7</sup>

By faith, we come to know that “the meaning of life is not to be found in the accumulation of wealth, power, and privilege, but in loving God and neighbor.”<sup>8</sup>

By faith, we are able to endure the troubles of this world, because God is—even now—working to redeem the world, to recreate it as a place of justice and peace.

By faith, we are invited to spend our lives working to be and become living witnesses for the generations to come.

“By faith...” *Imagine what we might do by faith.*

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Shelley. "Theological Perspective on Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16." *Feasting on the Word*. YR C, VOL 3. Louisville: WJK, 2010. 229.

<sup>2</sup> Kimberly F. Baker. "Hebrews 11—The Promise of Faith." *Review and Expositor*. No. 94, 1997. 444.

<sup>3</sup> Baker. 440.

<sup>4</sup> Shelley. 330.

<sup>5</sup> Baker. 441

<sup>6</sup> Baker. 445.

<sup>7</sup> Shelley. 330.

<sup>8</sup> Shelley. 330.