

Through Jesus Christ, God gives us Faith  
Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA  
by the Rev. Tom Pumphrey, August 7, 2016  
Proper 14, Year C, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

*The appointed Sunday reading is a portion of chapter 11. Here is the entire chapter, into chapter 12:*

**Hebrews 11:1 - 12:2a (NRSV):** *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 Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.*

*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.*

*By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead-- and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, "bowing in worship over the top of his staff." By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial. By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. <sup>29</sup> By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.*

*And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-- of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.*

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...*

About seven years ago now, my family and I moved from Honey Brook Pennsylvania to Phoenixville, Pennsylvania when I took a job in a new church. We bought a house that needed a little work. It turned out to need a lot of work. There were numerous repairs to make, and more that we discovered after we moved in. One of the biggest projects was the yard. For four years, the house was rented and the yard had been barely tended, and it was completely overgrown. Bushes were tangled with weeds and poison ivy, trees limbs that hung low blocked off sunlight to the lawn of bare patches and weeds. The garden shed in the back was being overtaken by the woods as ivy and plants crept up the back wall and onto the roof. It was a mess.

I told my wife that I had a vision for how the yard could look—with some work and time it could be beautiful. But for the first year, at least, all my wife saw was a bigger mess as I dug drainage ditches, pulled out shrubs and trucked-in dirt. I may have had a vision for this yard, but for a long time, it was still an exhausting and muddy mess. Would that vision ever really come to pass?

Christians in the first century had a vision for their lives. They discovered Jesus. They came to believe that Jesus is the messiah, the son of God, who lived and died for them and rose again, bringing new life to his disciples, and revealing the kingdom of heaven. They had great hope and great faith in their new found convictions. But they also faced a mess in their day to day lives. Their new faith isolated themselves from family and friends. They faced persecution in the synagogue and the marketplace. Over time, many faced discouragement in the challenges of the life and the challenges of the Christian life. The vision may have been hard for them to see.

The New Testament book Hebrews addresses a community of Christians who are going through this kind of challenge. The author of Hebrews calls them to live by faith: the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Chapter 11 goes through a list of people in Israelite History who lived by faith, using their example to encourage the people. We heard some of this from beginning of chapter 11. Next week, we will hear the rest of the chapter and into chapter 12. I would like to do what I did with Elijah earlier this summer: to set the context and draw the connections so you can hear them over these weeks.

Hebrews is not so much a letter as it is a sermon. So I'll call this author "the preacher" of Hebrews. You can hear in the language of Hebrews how the preacher is crafting a narrative, working from early in history through some of the great names of the faithful. He lists heroes from Israel's history who faced hardships and persecution in their lives, but by faith they followed God's call in pursuit of God's promises.

In our own day, we face challenges to live by faith. Sometimes it is hard for us to see God's vision for us and live by faith. Our experience of persecution is not quite the same as that of the first century, at least in this country. But we still face difficulty as Christians, and we still face the normal challenges that life dishes out. Our jobs are stressful—the job market is stressful. While the start of school is exciting for some, for others, school is an enormous challenge academically, socially and emotionally. Many of you are caring for kids and caring for parents at the same time. Caregivers help family members with chronic illness. And some of you yourselves face illness and chronic health challenges.

When life starts to feel overwhelming and you don't quite know how you could possibly make it through, can you see God's vision for you? Can you find assurance in the Christian hope? The conviction of things not seen? Can you live by faith?

Sometimes we speak about faith as if it is a commodity. People talk about not having enough faith, as if faith is something that you can save and spend, bank up in good times and deplete in hard times. Can you have a surplus of faith? Can you run out of faith? How does that work?

Faith is trust. Faith is belief. Faith is belief, most especially when belief requires trust. Trust doesn't have all the answers or guarantees. Some people talk about building their faith or growing their faith. But Christian tradition says that the virtue of faith is a gift from God. Faith is a gift from God given for all of us to embrace. And in that embrace, we live our lives by faith—faith and belief and trust in Jesus Christ.

How does the preacher of Hebrews address this question of faith? How does he encourage his congregation? For starters, he does so with style! With each point of reference, he returns to his theme of how each hero lived: by faith. He starts out slowly, but he builds the pulse of what preachers call “cadence” as he adds each hero to the list.

**By Faith**, Abel offered an acceptable sacrifice.

**By Faith**, Enoch was taken by God.

**By Faith** Noah built the ark when there was no flood, and saved his family when the flood came.

**By Faith**, Abraham and Sarah set out for a new country to answer God's call.

**By Faith** they had a son, Isaac, in their old age, with the promise of a great nation they never saw.

**By Faith**, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau

**By Faith**, Jacob blessed Joseph

**By Faith**, Joseph followed

**By Faith**, Moses endured hardships and brought the people out of Egypt,

**By Faith**, Rahab did not die in Jericho

‘I don't even have time to talk about Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, or David and Samuel and the prophets—all who **through faith**’

“conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight...were tortured, ... suffered mocking and flogging, ...chains and imprisonment...destitute, persecuted, tormented...wandered in deserts and mountains...”

“Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.”

When he says “perfect,” the preacher means “complete,” “whole.” We will see the vision made complete along with all those who have gone before us by faith.

You can just feel the tension in the room as the preacher has them on the edge of their seat. They must be thinking “Can we live like them? Can we live by faith? How do we live by faith? Is there truly a difference between wishful thinking and living by faith??”

And then the preacher brings it home:

“Therefore!” he says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”—the one who will make that vision complete, Jesus, the one who gives us faith.

We’re not the only ones who have gone through tough times... so many have gone before us and *by faith* they have endured—including many people in this room. By faith they have seen the vision, and in their lifetime they even have seen part of that vision come to pass. But the perfecter of our faith—Jesus, the one who makes our faith complete and whole—will bring that vision to perfection in us as well. Through Jesus Christ, God gives us faith.

To have faith, choose to believe in Jesus Christ. Choose and believe and step forward in that belief. That is faith. Embrace the gift of faith that God gives you. You will see God at work in the world around you. God will carry you through, and will bring you unexpected blessings along the way. Most especially, God will bring you blessings through this great cloud of witnesses around you today—others who are with you on that journey by faith, looking to Jesus who perfects and completes our faith.

Remember that vision I had of a beautiful back yard back in Pennsylvania? Four years later, Silke and I stood on our porch looking at the back yard. We saw the newly painted shed, sunlight streaming down through the trees, rhododendron and azaleas flourishing, flowers that Silke planted blooming, grass thick and thriving. We could take joy not so much in what we had done but in what God had given us. We hadn’t finished the yard—it was not yet *complete*. But we could take joy as we handed the care of that yard to a new family, so that we could come here to St. Peter & St. Paul. Here we can labor in a new vineyard, to plant, to water, to harvest and to find the vision of what God is doing in this place.

Can you see the vision?

Can you see us Growing disciples of Jesus Christ?

Can you see God’s vision of a Christian Community empowered by the Holy Spirit?

Can you see God’s vision of us active in the Worship of God, Discipleship for all ages, Serving Christ in the world?

Can you see God’s vision for *you*? Can you find it in this community?

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,  
let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,  
looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.