

**Aug. 18, 2019**

**Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-13; 23-32; 39-40; 12: 1-2**

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into the study of your Scripture. We pray that we might have the faith of our spiritual ancestors. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## **Roll Call**

Soon after I took this position at Triune, my then-associate pastor, Alfred Johnson, met a woman in his chaplaincy training at the hospital. He rushed into my office, saying, "You have got to meet this woman. You two will hit it off."

And we did. Like me, she'd gone to seminary late in life. But unlike me, up until then, she had been a stay-at-home mom. She had an affluent family, affluent church, affluent neighbors.

She admitted as much. That first day at lunch, she told me about all the suffering she saw in her new ministry. And she said, "Before I did this, I lived my life in a bubble."

*I lived my life in a bubble.*

I knew what she meant. Some people manage to live their lives with plenty of money, good physical and mental health, a good marriage, and healthy and happy children. They are able to isolate themselves from the suffering of others, from the suffering of this world.

I remember back in the 1980s when Princess Diana produced her two sons, two heirs to the British throne. Vince said, "You know, she's done her job. All she has to do now is lie by the pool and drink beer."

He assumed she lived in a bubble. But as we found in graphic detail much later, Diana lived in anything but. All the money and glamour available to the British royal family couldn't protect her from the very real suffering of rejection, a failed marriage, self-loathing, and ultimately, of an untimely violent death.

Hers is probably a more common human condition than those fortunate few who manage to bypass life's calamities.

Because there are so many ways to suffer. Disease. Poverty. Failed relationships. Accidents. Addictions. Lost jobs. Infertility. Loss of loved ones.

So why would my friend, a woman who lived in a perfect earthly bubble, step outside it to face that suffering? Her old friends asked her that all the time.

They wanted to know why she wouldn't go to the beach with them anymore, why she wouldn't play tennis, why she didn't have time to travel and attend parties and do all the things she used to do.

I'm not sure how she answered their questions. But I think, at the core, her answer must have come from our Scripture passage today. It's in the book of Hebrews.

Now there's a lot we don't know about this letter to the Hebrews. We don't know who wrote it, except it almost certainly was *not* Paul. We don't know who these Hebrews were to whom it was written.

And it's not even a letter, really. It's more of a sermon. It's a long sermon addressed to Christians who apparently were weary of everything Christian – weary of worship, weary of prayer, weary of people calling them to justice, weary of being oddballs in their society.

And this preacher addressed that weariness with a complex theological portrait of Jesus and of Christianity. In the part we are going to look at today, the writer tries to explain faith. And he does this by giving a roll call of biblical heroes who did extraordinary things because of their faith in God, their faith that something existed beyond this life.

Like my friend, they stepped out of relatively comfortable existences for no good reason on earth. What was the reason for their action? Something beyond this earth.

Something we call faith. A faith of things hoped for but not seen.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Hebrews 11. Because of time, we're going to skip around a good bit.

**Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-13; 23-32; 39-40; 12: 1-2**

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 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.

*(skip to verse 8)*

8 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.

9 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. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11 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. By faith Sarah herself, though barren, received power to conceive, even when she was too old, because she considered him faithful who had promised. 12 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.'

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.

*(skip to verse 23)*

23 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, killed the Egyptian, because he observed the humiliation of his people.

24 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward.

27 By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. 28 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.

29 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.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.

31 By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

32 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....

*(skip to verse 39)*

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

## **Chapter 12**

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, sin that easily distracts, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross,

disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

If you're a fan of the Old Testament, you probably recognized this roll call of saints. We don't know if all these people lived in ancient world bubbles, but the author of Hebrews sets at least some of them up that way. Many of them gave up earthly comfort and ease because they felt the tug of God.

The writer starts out with a definition of this mysterious thing known as faith. He calls it **“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”**

I have spent my life wavering between a conviction that there is a God who cares for us, and questioning if that conviction is merely yearning on our part. Do we want to believe in God so badly that we create God?

Many people would tell you that's exactly what we have done.

Clearly, I have come down on the other side, the side that believes there is a God. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here. But as the writer of Hebrews knows very well, we are NOT going to see visible proof of that God in this life.

**“All of these died in the faith without having received the promises....”**

Do you remember the story in Mark (Mark 9: 14-27) in which a boy's father asks Jesus to heal his son of the evil spirits that hurled him into fire or water?

Jesus responded, **“All things can be done for the one who believes.”** (9: 23)

And do you remember the father's response? **“I believe; help my unbelief!”** (9: 24)

*I believe. Help my unbelief.*

That is the dynamic the writer of Hebrews was dealing with. This flock was Christian. They believed. But apparently, they were wondering if this Christianity they'd been practicing, this Christ they'd been following, was worth the effort.

They wanted to believe. But they could not *see* Christ's promises being fulfilled. And so they wavered.

So he writes that faith is “**the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**” But the best way he knows to explain faith is to show examples of lives in which faith *can* be seen.

Isn't that what we do every Sunday? Russell Snow told me that someone asked him recently where he went to church. And he said he came here because it was like being back in elementary school, when the best part of his day was circling up for story hour.

We tell the stories of Hosea and Isaiah, of Pete Hollis and Daniel Berrigan, of Vernelle and Dawn. We tell the stories of faith that can be seen.

In the verses we read, the writer starts with Abraham. We don't know if Abraham's home in Ur was a bubble of protection against suffering, but we do know it was home. After responding in faith to God's call, not only Abraham, but his descendents Isaac and Jacob forever after lived in tents.

They looked forward to the heavenly city built by God, but they would not have an earthly city. They did not receive the things promised. They welcomed them in the distance.

We then skipped more verses about Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, and went straight to Moses. Moses did live in a bubble, the handsome son of the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter who rescued him from the Nile. But he left that comfortable life **“to share ill treatment with the people of God.... He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt....”**

That's an interesting way to phrase it, because Moses lived 1,400 years before Jesus was born. So the writer credits Moses with a Trinitarian knowledge, with anticipating the birth of the Christ. His faith was such that he could look ahead to that time.

For the writer of Hebrews, Moses' life is an example of faith. This is what faith looks like in action.

Rather dramatic, isn't it? To give up a life of comfort and luxury and ease in the royal court for a life leading a rebellious and whiney people through the desert.

Why does someone do that? Because he is convinced that there are things of utmost importance in this life that we cannot see. Because he is persuaded that this world was prepared for us by God, and that there is more prepared that we cannot yet see.

You don't come to church if all you believe in is what you can see. You come to church if you are convinced there are important things we cannot see.

Or you come to church *if you hope* there are important things we cannot see.

The writer of Hebrews, writing just decades after Jesus died, was facing a situation much like ours. His church-goers were tired. Their faith was wavering. Like us, they

wondered if coffee and a newspaper at Starbucks wouldn't be more pleasant than singing and preaching, reading and praying.

And so the writer of Hebrews reminded his people of what faith looked like. It looked like the children of Israel walking across the Red Sea.

It looked like the walls of Jericho falling down from trumpet blows.

It looked like the salvation of the prostitute Rahab because she hid the Hebrew spies in Jericho.

The writer then swept through dozens more heroes in just a few verses, a whole wrap-up of Old Testament characters who followed God to the end of their days. Yet, all of them died without realizing the fruition of their faith.

And that is why his congregation, our congregation, must persevere. Must persevere when we cannot see any earthly reward in sight.

**“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.....”**

The biblical witness tells us, shows us, what faith looks like in action. Though we cannot see the end game – just as Abraham and Moses and Rahab could not -- we can see examples of people who lived with the conviction that the truth was present.

Those are the witnesses who surround us like a great cloud.

In our own lives, too, we see people who step out of their bubbles to confront the suffering of their neighbors. They step into Triune Circles, into the art room, into Playback Café, into meal service, into a dozen ministries.

They do it because they are convinced there are things in this world they cannot see.

They do it because *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

Amen.