



Roanoke, Virginia

May 3, 2020

“By Faith”

Hebrews 11:1-10, 32-34; 12:1

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11:1 Now 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.

⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

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.

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— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.



12:1 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.

Every spring when the azaleas start to bloom, I think of my Grandma Thompson. She always used to visit my family in the springtime, and I remember we would drive her around our neighborhood in Northern Virginia so that we could show her all the best azalea displays. She passed away when I was in middle school, but I've always remembered her as a lover of flowers, and a woman of prayer. She kept lists tucked in her Bible of people she was praying for—I remember wondering how anyone even knew that many people. I have a lot of cousins on that side of the family, and I think we've *all* kept our faith as a central value in our lives. I know it's not *just* because of our grandmother's example that that happened, but I know that remembering her faithful witness has given me a vision for how meaningful a long life of faith can be.

Even though we're gathered virtually, today is Legacy Sunday, where we have the chance to think about the ways that faithful servants in the history of this church have helped the church today flourish, and to consider how the gifts and decisions we make now can impact the church for generations to come. Earlier in the week I listened to Nancy Gray's message that you just heard a few minutes ago, and it's had me thinking about legacy, about how the way forward is always impacted by the people who came before. Whether it's financially or intellectually or spiritually, we're always working with the world we're born into. We can be weighed down by legacy or we can be lifted up by it. What we leave behind matters.

The story of the people of Israel has always included an awareness of this truth. God's people are often instructed to look back to the legacy of God's faithfulness in the past in order to find the hope needed to move forward in the future. And here, in the New Testament book of Hebrews, in the passage that we just read, we're offered a look back on the legacy of those people who did take God at God's word, who did trust in God's faithfulness, who took a step forward by faith, trusting in things not seen. The book of Hebrews is basically a sermon preached to a congregation of exhausted believers who just aren't sure they have the energy to keep going. And chapter 11 in particular provides a response to this feeling.

If you've read it before, you know that the list of names in Hebrews 11 is long—a lot longer than what I read. It lists person after person—men, women, young, old—sharing the ancient stories of faith in hope that these stories will have an effect on the people who hear them.

We get the most detail about the story of Abraham. I think, of all the stories, it's the most encouraging one to read on a day you're feeling a little lost, because Abraham starts out a little lost. It's a good story for our pandemic times. At the beginning, it says by faith Abraham obeyed God; he got up and left his homeland, he set out not knowing where he was going.



If there's ever a verse that sums up how I've been feeling about the current state of the world, it's this one. We know we have to get up and go somewhere. So many essential things need to happen, decisions have to be made. But we have no idea where we're going. It's hard to predict what the virus will do; it's hard to predict how our leaders will respond. How are we supposed to plan where to go next? I can barely plan what I'm going to wear tomorrow—my blue pajama pants or my grey pajama pants? But still there are some decisions we *have* to make that require us to look weeks or months ahead, and we don't know what the world is going to look like then. We don't know where we're going.

So, when I hear the story of Abraham, I feel comforted, I feel encouraged. See, in the kind of experience we're living through right now, faith can feel like a limited resource. But Abraham, who had no idea what would happen when he trusted God, stepped out towards an unknown future. He had nothing to go on. All he had was faith. And if Abraham can do it by faith, then maybe I can too. And it's not just Abraham, because the author of Hebrews keeps going down the list: by faith Abraham, by faith Jacob, by faith Isaac, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel... and as I hear each name it's like my resolve strengthens. Their legacy of faith gives me strength. What we leave behind matters.

But if what we leave behind matters, then I've got a lot to live up to. I like to look back to the faith of Abraham, I like to look back to the faith of my grandmother, but when I do, I also have to ask, "What about the people who might one day look back to me?" It's a lot of pressure! What are *my* grandchildren going to say was the defining value of *my* life? Or, how will future generations look back on the work of the church in 2020? What are we doing right now to leave a legacy of compassion and generosity and courage? When they look back at this pandemic, when your kids look back at this pandemic, how will they say we responded? Will they see us as people of integrity, people whose values and actions line up? Will they see our faith? It's a lot of pressure.

How much faith does it feel like you have today? I'll be honest: mine goes up and down depending on the moment. But so did Abraham's. Abraham *set out* by faith, but along the way he doubted God's promises and he cheated and lied. Moses, by faith, told the Pharaoh to let God's people go, but then he backpedaled and wavered when the people were looking to him for leadership. I guess Rahab helped save the Israelite spies by faith, but also because she was terrified of their army. David did a lot of things by faith, but he also did a lot of things by violence and deception. Almost every person on this list—Jacob, Samson, Jephthah—they have a sketchy history with faith, with faithfulness, and the faith they did have looks different for each one of them. Instead of saying that all these heroes made it by having *perfect* faith, or a certain kind of faith, it's almost like the author of Hebrews is saying, by faith they made it by doing the best that they could.

In a sense, that's what faith is, isn't it? Doing *the best that we can* to do good, and love others, and follow God. Even when we're exhausted. When we feel like we have nothing left.



Our attempts at faith right now may not seem like they'll make it into the history books. Our limited attempts at staying connected and serving our neighbors and hanging onto that last shred of patience may not feel like much.

But if, by faith, you're doing the best that you can today, you are already more than enough.

That doesn't mean there's not work to be done. That doesn't mean that our neighbors don't need us to actively leave a legacy of justice and mercy. They do. Our world needs us.

But faith is the assurance of things *hoped for*. The *conviction* of things not seen. We put one foot in front of the other, we continue to serve those in need, we continue to sing praise to God, we put one foot in front of the other not because we know where we're going, but because we believe in a God who honors the effort of broken, doubting, messed up people. God will take whatever kind of faith we have today and turn it into a legacy.

By faith this morning you woke up and you decided to make room in your day for worship. By faith parents all over this country are surviving; providing support and security for their children even while they're juggling working from home or unemployment, and sometimes several screaming toddlers or teenagers at a time. By faith friends and neighbors are celebrating birthdays and marriages and graduations with cards and signs and parades. By faith teachers are learning how to teach even preschoolers on Zoom. By faith essential workers are showing up for their jobs. By faith our leaders are making difficult decisions with limited information. By faith the people of Second Presbyterian Church have continued to preach the gospel through word and deed. By faith this church community has *increased* our giving to our neighbors in need. And what more should I say? I'd run out time if I told you about the faith of Helen, Marianne, Doug, Lilli, Emily, Jim, Madelyn, John, Cheryl, David, Suzanne, Ruth Ellen, and I could go on and on. The courage, the generosity, the resilience, the making-it-through that I have witnessed over these past two months—it gives me hope. And it is leaving a legacy.

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, 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. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Amen.

