



Roanoke, Virginia

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“By Faith”

Hebrews 11:1-10, 12:1-2

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This has been a summer full of stories at Second. The children enjoyed learning Fish Tales at Vacation Bible School, inspired by the blue whale in Kirk Hall. Our youth have created their own stories following their service trip to Kentucky and their week at Montreat. And at the Trent Getaway this weekend, our church friends are hearing Bible stories about Our Sacred Home.

We learn from stories that strike a chord in us. Stories deepen our understanding of events and history; they illuminate our thoughts and feelings, foster connections and inspire actions. Stories help us work out who we are and know what we stand for. And stories help us better understand each other.

The Christian faith, itself, grew through the stories told and passed on from one person to another, from one generation to the next. Jesus liked to teach by telling parables and the New Testament includes memorable stories about Jesus with his disciples, healing the sick, performing miracles, and talking to crowds.

Old Testament stories about people of faith are prominent in this morning's scripture from Hebrews. The anonymous author of Hebrews is writing a letter to a community of second-generation Jewish Christians who had grown disheartened and weary of Christian life. They were having trouble holding onto their faith. In this letter, the author reminds them of our ancestors who had lived by faith, hoping to encourage this community. Hear now the word of the Lord.



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 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 yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and become 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 good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as innumerable as the grains of sand by the seashore."

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.

Throughout our lives, most of us move back and forth along a faith continuum with doubt on one end and assurance on the other, working out what faith in God means to us. Rachel Held Evans describes this as "on the days when I believe."¹ On the days when she believes, she feels "enfolded in a story so much greater" than her own, "a story that knits together a thousand generations of saints—It's a story that makes audacious claims about a man-god named Jesus and calls us into his outstretched arms—and then there are the other days."²

This struggle with faith reminds me of our four-year-old grandson, Oliver, who is struggling to learn to swim. Based on what he could see and touch, if you put something in water, it sinks. He did not believe his teacher who told him if he moved his arms and legs in certain ways, he could stay afloat. However, after a couple of lessons, when no one was watching, Oliver started to try stroking his arms and kicking his legs as his instructor had taught, to find out if he really could float. Standing in shallow water in case this didn't work, Oliver tried out these new skills. He hoped

¹ Evans, Rachel Held, *Wholehearted Faith* (New York, New York: Harper Collins, 2020), p. 18.

² Ibid



to float, to trust in the water to hold him up, even when that concept defied logic. In our everyday lives, we, too, may feel a little like Oliver, hoping to float, hoping to believe, but struggling to make sense of what we see with the unseen, what we know with the unknown, what we understand with the mysterious. And some days, that is how it feels to try to live with faith in God.

Our passage today opens with an eloquent working definition of faith. The author of Hebrews tells us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”³ Faith assures us of hope and allows us to look into the future and know God is there with us. But faith is also believing in things we can’t see with our eyes or grasp in our hands. If you can see or touch something, there is no need for faith. We need faith for what we cannot see, touch or even understand. As one commentator explains “faith gives us evidence of the invisible spiritual world—and proves to the mind things that cannot be seen.”⁴ Faith makes the invisible visible and the unreal real. In the well-known story, The Little Prince, a mysterious fox promises to tell a little boy the greatest secrets of life. When at last the secret is told, it is this. “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the human eye.”⁵

Our hearts help us see what is real but invisible to us. Faith in God gives us the capacity to see things invisible to the naked eye. According to Union Seminary Professor Frances Taylor Gench, “Faith enables believers to live by a vision of God and God’s purposes for the earth, a vision—not yet visible to the eye” and “empowers believers to move into the future with trust and confidence, knowing that the future belongs to God.”⁶ To the human eye, there is trouble all around in this world, but to the eye of faith, there is another reality with God.

Faith enables us to trust that, in time, God will fulfill his promises, and we can live with courage, like those faithful witnesses from Israel’s storied history mentioned in the “Hall of Faith,” in our passage. First is Abel, who offered God a greater sacrifice than Cain, because his was offered in faith. Next, by faith, Enoch was taken from life without experiencing death because he pleased God. By faith, Noah followed God’s instructions to build an ark after being warned by God of things not yet seen. By faith, when God called him, Abraham left his homeland and went to an unknown land, living as a foreigner, looking forward to a better city to be built by God. And by faith, Sarah was able to bear a child, long past her childbearing age, although she and Abraham never saw the promised multitude of descendants that followed their son, Isaac.

We are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses who encourage us. Even though each of these people died with God’s promises unfulfilled, each demonstrated unwavering faith in God. They trusted God, even when they had questions or didn’t have all the information. They acted on

³ Hebrews 11:1 (NRSV).

⁴ David Guzik, “The Enduring Word Commentary: Hebrews Chapter 11,” *The Enduring Word*, <https://enduringword.com>.

⁵ Long, Thomas, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching: Hebrews*, (Louisville, Kentucky: John Know Press, 1997). P. 114.

⁶ Gench, Frances Taylor, *Hebrews and James*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 63.



God's promises without seeing results, but believing God would ultimately fulfill his promises. Their stories teach us to trust in God's faithfulness, even when God is silent, to wait on God, and to be patient when we don't see immediate results.

Ten days ago, my middle son, Jeff, had an experience that tested his faith. Jeff and his family were vacationing on the coast of Maui in Hawaii when suddenly tsunami siren warnings started to blare. Earlier that morning, there had been an 8.8 earthquake off the coast of Russia and scientists were confident tsunami waves would be hitting Hawaii that evening. Our son initially ignored the siren, thinking it was a practice alert. But then someone banged on the door of his vacation rental, telling him that he and his family needed to evacuate to a safe place on higher ground inland, and gave him a map directing them where to go. Despite blue skies and no sign of impending danger, Jeff and his family packed up and drove to the evacuation site. There, they waited, sitting in the hot sun. The tsunami waves were supposed to arrive by seven that evening but as the sun set, nothing happened. Though there were no visible signs of a tsunami, they trusted the experts and remained in place. When the tsunami waves eventually arrived, fortunately, they were not as dangerous as expected and the "all clear" was given. Jeff and his family returned safely to their vacation home. That day, I suspect Jeff felt like some of our Biblical heroes. Trusting experts who told him how to respond to an invisible threat, he evacuated, knowing a tsunami was imminent but without seeing any visible signs of danger, and waited patiently with hope and faith that promises of safety would be fulfilled.

As Professor Bryan Whitfield explains, faith, "the assurance of things hoped for," provides a "guarantee, a peg on which we hang our hopes," but faith also prompts us to act.⁷ Faithfulness holds fast to the promises of God, but it "is courage that moves us forward" and "launches us out into the unknown."⁸ Tom Long captures a similar thought in his description of faith having an inward sense of confidence as a response to the trustworthiness of God and an outward actuality that results in action. "Faith as an inward reality," or as the peg on which we hang our hopes, "sings 'We Shall Overcome';" "faith as an outward reality," or as the courage that moves us forward, "marches at Selma."⁹ Holding fast to the promises of God gives us the confidence to trust God and the courage to act.

Some of us find it easier to "hold fast" than to move forward, to hold on to God's promises but without responding. We know the Bible stories, but we find it hard to act. Others of us are good at moving forward, but without understanding God's promises, we struggle when we encounter obstacles. We need both dimensions of faithfulness, "to *hold fast* to the promises of God and to *move forward* into a future which is God's."¹⁰ Amid uncertainty and change, Abraham and Sarah both held fast to God's promises. They trusted in God's promise that Abraham would be the

⁷ Bryan Whitfield, "Commentary on Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16," *Working Preacher*, August 8, 2010, <https://www.workingpreacher.com>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Long, pp.113-114.

¹⁰ Whitfield, *Working Preacher*.



father of a great nation, even though Abraham and Sara did not live to see this promise fulfilled. They also understood that “faithfulness is a form of courage that launches us out into the unknown, knowing the future is God’s.”¹¹ They *acted* on God’s promises, believing God would be faithful and ultimately fulfill what he had promised.

We, too, can have faith in God’s promises even when the future is unclear. Even when God’s plan is not unfolding as expected, we can trust in God and choose to act with courage. Like the people in the Old Testament stories, we can have faith in the mysterious power of God and trust in the future which belongs to God. Faith lives in people who carry on when they can’t find a job; faith lives in those who face terminal illnesses but continue to engage with the world until their time comes; faith lives in parents who want children but can’t conceive and find family in other ways. Faith is a way of living, realizing God will be with you despite the unsettling problems you face. “At its best,” says Rachel Held Evans, “Faith teaches us to live without certainty and to hope without guarantee.”¹²

And as we enter this great procession of faith, we see the face of Jesus. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we can trust in his promises of forgiveness and salvation. We can lay aside our sins to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” and look to Jesus—who “endured the cross” and sits at the right hand of God.¹³ According to Hebrews, Jesus is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”¹⁴ Christ’s suffering inspires those who follow him “to endure the kind of suffering that can accompany the life of discipleship” and trust that he will not abandon us.¹⁵

Hardship is part of life, and the Christian life is no exception. Yet, through the inner eye of faith, we see another reality. We can trust in what we cannot see. We can have faith in God’s promises to give us strength, to not abandon us and to love us unconditionally. In the words of Rachel Held Evans, “On our best days, Christians believe God’s most significant act of love put God right in the middle of our messy, dangerous world.”¹⁶ Even when this world does not make sense to us, we can move confidently into the future, trusting in God’s abundant love and looking to Christ. And following in Christ’s footsteps, grace abounds. Remember that faith is not seeing everything clearly but trusting in the unseen power and promises of God.

Trusting in God’s love and holding fast to his promises gives us the courage to act in obedience to God. And that means we are called to love our neighbors. Living by faith requires us to go all in, even when it is hard. It means to befriend the stranger, to be present with the grieving friend, to help to feed the hungry and to love our enemies. It means having the courage to stand up

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Evans, p.22.

¹³ Hebrews 12:1-2 (NRSV).

¹⁴ Hebrews 12:2 (NRSV).

¹⁵ Mary Foksett, “Commentary on Hebrews 11:29-12:2,” *Working Preacher*, August 18, 2019, <https://www.workingpreacher.org>.

¹⁶ Evans, p. 23.



for justice when we see wrongs that need to be addressed. The life of faith means to love God, to hold fast to his promises, and to summon the courage to love others.

Drawing on the imagery from our scripture passage, NT Wright sees this life of faith as a long-distance race. Those who have already run pass the baton to the next runner, just as our Biblical ancestors have passed on their faith to us. Holding fast to the promise of God, we should turn to Jesus, our model of faithful endurance. Sustained by faith, you must “Keep your eyes, or at least your imagination, fixed on the finishing line and on the one who is at the center of the cloud of witnesses, waiting there to greet you himself.”¹⁷ After all, Jesus ran this race before we even attempted it. Hold fast to the faith that lets us see the invisible and gives us the courage to trust God and follow Christ.

Perhaps living by faith is best summed up by another story, that of Jesus healing a blind man.¹⁸ As Jesus was leaving Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, a blind beggar, Bartimaeus, was sitting by the roadside. Despite objections from the crowd, he cried out loudly for Jesus to have mercy on him. Jesus stopped and asked the blind man to come to him. Jesus asked the man, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man answered, “Let me see again.” Jesus responded by saying, “Go, your faith has made you well” and immediately the man regained his sight and followed Jesus on his way. The man’s faith came first and then his sight followed. May it also be true for us: Your faith has let you see what cannot be seen with the natural eye and it has given you the courage to follow in Christ’s footsteps. With eyes of faith, hold fast to God’s promises, look to Jesus and live with courage.

¹⁷ Wright, N. T., *Hebrews for Everyone*, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 149.

¹⁸ Mark 10:46-52 (NRSV).

