

Sermon: Faith and Promises

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Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

by Eric Anderson

“Faith,” wrote the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

I’ll quickly note that although there’s a long tradition of crediting this book to the Apostle Paul, there are a couple of good reasons not to. First, in the letters we know well such as Romans or Corinthians or Galatians, Paul identifies himself as the author. The first words of Romans, in fact, are, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ.”

There’s nothing like that in Hebrews. The work doesn’t follow the structures of a first century letter at all; it seems more like a sermon or a theological reflection. The name of the author simply never appears.

The second reason is that Hebrews sounds nothing at all like the writings of Paul. It uses different thought processes. It relies on a different set of background information.

Nevertheless it does share a common concern with the Apostle Paul, and for that matter with Jesus. That concern is the centrality of faith in the Christian religious life.

We have been well schooled in the importance of faith, but in the first century it was a different matter. All religions I’ve ever heard of have some dimension of faith, some way in which they live out the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Christianity does have some distinctness in faith, if not precisely uniqueness.

Every religion I’ve ever heard of includes some kind of devotional practice. These range from private prayer and meditation – which can look very different between different religions – to large gathered services of worship. Every religion I’ve ever heard of includes some kind of devotional giving or sacrifice. First century Romans, for example, believed that the practice of sacrifice to the gods was not just a central religious practice but a critical one. Without sacrifice, the gods would withdraw their support or actively work against the Roman empire and its people.

Every religion I’ve ever heard of includes some kind of ethical guide, some kind of direction for human behavior. Judaism has a long history of not just following the law, but engaging in study

and reflection and interpretation of the law, as a foundational religious practice. In Confucianism, reflection on ethics and wisdom occupy so much thought and time that Westerners tend to ignore or discount the devotional elements.

Christianity includes all of this. Here we are gathered in devotion. In a little bit we'll ask you to make a gift, a sacrifice. One of the main purposes of what I'm doing now is to encourage your ethical reflection and righteous behavior.

But it's also to help support you in faith itself.

The bare definition here in Hebrews 11 makes faith into quite a challenge. It's the "assurance of things hoped for" – that is, things that do not currently exist but which we desire. The classic example is that of the child who hopes to receive a bicycle for Christmas. Will the bicycle be there on Christmas morning? Who knows? Hope is a condition in which the outcome is still unknown.

According to the author of Hebrews, faith transforms that hope into something else: assurance. Christopher T. Holmes writes at Working Preacher, "Thee Greek word translated as 'assurance' (hypostasis) has a wide range of meanings, and its significance in verse one is disputed. The word denotes something real, tangible, or objective, in contrast to something illusory or intangible. In this sense, hypostasis provides the basis or actualization of hope."

To that child on Christmas Eve, the crucial actualization of hope is that there be a physical bicycle present on the next morning. For the author of Hebrews, though there is a manifestation of hope, a nearly graspable existence of what is hoped for, that takes place in the exercise of faith. Faith doesn't transform hope into reality. Faith grasps the reality that hope anticipates.

Hope says, "This may happen." Faith says, "It will happen. Indeed, in the mind of God, it already has happened."

The author of Hebrews went on to provide us with examples of historic figures from the Hebrew Scriptures who had lived with faith, hope, and anticipation, but who had not actually seen the fulfillment of their hopes. Rather sneakily, however, these examples are also of people who had experienced some fulfillment, indeed significant fulfillment of God's promises.

Jacob and his children survived a great drought, didn't they? Moses and the Israelites did escape Egypt, didn't they? And my favorite from these examples: "By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days."

Which means there were six days of faith, and one day of fulfillment.

The author of Hebrews didn't list these examples for us to admire people who had had faith for no reason. The list is there so that we can emulate people who based their faith in the future upon the promises that had already been fulfilled in their lives and in the lives of those past.

Further, these examples highlight the response that faithful people make. As Dr. Holmes continues, "Abraham's example highlights the active or dynamic nature of faith. Faith is an orientation that leads to decisive action, even and especially when there is no tangible or visible support for that action."

Well. There's some. Don't forget that there's some. Maybe not enough for some people, maybe not enough for most people, but nobody comes to these questions of faith and faithful action without some history, even some experience. Even Abraham would have heard of the blessings of God to his ancestors. Abraham may well have already known something of God's grace in his life before striking out for Canaan.

How else does Abraham's story make any sense? How else did Abraham gain enough confidence in his relationship with God to argue, as we heard in Scripture a couple weeks ago?

As Jennifer Vija Pietz writes at Working Preacher, "But whenever snapshots of faith focus too sharply on outcomes or on human capacity to believe, they obscure what faith is all about: a living, loving relationship with the God who is perfectly faithful." Abraham's faith wasn't just illustrated in his willingness to venture out into the wilderness. Abraham's faith was demonstrated by his willingness to engage.

Our faith is not something we pull out of nowhere; faith does not magically appear like a rabbit from a magician's hat. Faith is gently built upon the stories we know, the stories of faithful people who had experienced fulfillment in God's promises. Faith is built on our trust in them, and it is further built when God fulfills, in ways great and small, our trust in God. Faith is not a static formula of belief. Faith is a dynamic, shifting, and above all growing reality.

Jesus compared faith to a mustard seed, remember. So small, so fragile – and the source from which great things come to be.

The great enemy of faith is not doubt – questions, in fact, nourish faith. As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "The opposite of faith is accepting anything less than the kingdom God wishes to give us. It's hanging back and holding still when the call of God on our lives is to *move*."

Shortly we will come to the table of Holy Communion for nourishment of our faith. Let us find it: find it in reflecting on the old story of God's fulfillment of promises in Jesus, find it in taking in real nourishment from bread and cup, and find it in the spiritual nourishment that will grow within us from that seed of faith that has grown in us so long.

Amen.