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Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Grounded in Hope: Faith and Faithfulness

This is our third week of our Grounded in Hope worship series focusing on texts from the Letter to the Hebrews.

The first week, World Communion Sunday, we explored our “hope in Christ as an anchor . . . that has guided and nurtured the church through difficult eras and troubled times”¹

Last week, we looked at Grace, and Jesus as the “great high priest who can sympathize with our weakness and invites us to the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”²

This week, we will delve into the meaning of faith. But first, a reminder about the setting of our scripture.

We don’t really know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews or precisely when, though there is evidence it was written in the late first century. We don’t know where it was written or to whom specifically. We call the text the “letter” to the Hebrews, but really it is more like an essay or a sermon. Imagine the whole book as one sermon - we’d be here much longer than an hour!

What we do know is that it delves into the nature of Christ like no other book, and that its audience is exhausted. The end of chapter 10 is an exhortation on perseverance for a community that had been persecuted and ridiculed for believing in Christ Jesus. It reminds those listening to hold onto hope (10:23), spur one another on toward love and good deeds (10:24), encourage one another (10:25), and to not throw away their confidence (10:35).

With this in mind, hear the word of God from Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we

¹ From Pastor Lisa Schrott Sermon, October 6, 2024, Presbyterian Church of Okemos.
https://www.okemospres.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Sermon_10_06_24.pdf

² From Pastor Lisa Schrott Sermon, October 13, 2024, Presbyterian Church of Okemos.
https://www.okemospres.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Sermon_10_13_24.pdf

understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁸By 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. ⁹By 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. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By 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. ¹²Therefore 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.’ ¹³All 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, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But 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.

This is the word of the Lord.

I wonder if someone not familiar with a religious tradition asked you to define faith, what would you say? How would you define it? We have so many phrases with faith in them. . . have a little faith, don't lose the faith, faith can move mountains, take a leap of faith . . . Faith is central to who we are, and sometimes we struggle to put it into words.

Let's look at our scripture writer's definition for guidance:

¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for

Or, as the Common English Bible translates it,

Faith is the reality of what we hope for

Tom Long, presbyterian pastor and Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory University claims this as an inward reality - we have confidence that God's promises of justice, peace, mercy, and salvation are true even when it seems the world is falling apart. Faith is a response to God's trustworthiness. He also claims faith in this setting as an outward actuality -"a

reality of those promises moving as an advance force and operating behind enemy lines.”³

Inwardly, we trust in God’s promises, outwardly, we move in response to those promises. Inwardly, we trust that God’s kin-dom will one day reign, outwardly, we work for that kin-dom on earth, even now.

The second part of the writer’s definition of faith is “the conviction of things not seen” or as the CEB translates it, the proof of what we don’t see. When we look at the night sky we see the moon and stars, when we look at the world around us, we see dirt and animals, trees and plants, and it is by faith that we know these seen things come into being through God and processes we cannot see.

It is one thing for our sermon’s writer to define faith for his audience, it is another to give examples of the faithful who have gone before, and that is just what the author does for the rest of this chapter.

This morning’s text focuses on the faithful ancestor, Abraham, who did many things by faith: he obeyed God by setting out for a place that he was to inherit from God - the promised land - and he didn’t even know where they were going! Inwardly, they trusted the covenant God made with them, outwardly, they put their feet on the ground and got moving.

By faith Abraham and Sarah, had a child in their very old ages - “as good as dead” the writer of Hebrews calls them, and, as we heard in the passage from Genesis that Lisa read, Abraham’s offspring would be as numerous as the stars.

By faith they stayed in the land they were promised - not in permanent housing, not having received the promises for themselves, but in tents, as did their son Isaac and grandson Jacob. Inwardly, they trusted, outwardly, they lived as strangers in a foreign land, looking forward in hope to a heavenly city that is as God designs it.

Using these “by faith statements” let’s take a peak at ourselves and at the church.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 84.

By Faith, the Church has endured splits and reunions, difficult conversations, changes to the Book of Order.

By Faith, the Church has persevered through declining attendance and a narrative of failure.

By faith, our congregations have endured a global pandemic that required us to learn to be the church and worship differently.

By faith, we persevere with hope in a culture where worth is defined by what can be measured - money, status, power; a political landscape with sharp edges of division; a world and country filled with violence and injustice.

By faith we look back, not at what was, but at who has set an example of faith for us. The ancestors of our faith - Abraham and Sarah, the prophets, Jesus, the disciples - those who did not look back, but who looked forward in hope, knowing that God is calling us all to a city of God's own making.

By faith we do not linger on what was - where we have been, what life looked like "before" for by faith we look forward in hope. Verse 15 claims that if Abraham and Sarah had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But they didn't. Though I imagine there were some arguments along the way, some temptations to turn around.

In my own life, I have longed to go back . . . to be the person I was BEFORE . . . to have things be the way they were BEFORE. Maybe you can relate to that, wanting to go back to BEFORE - before the injury, before a loved one died, before a life changing illness, before . . .

We do this in community and in church too . . . we long to go back to BEFORE the pandemic, BEFORE the hard political divides, BEFORE people were leaving the church.

But to long to go back is to deny the presence and movement of God through the Holy Spirit that got us to where we are now and to where God is calling us in the future. To look back with longing denies the life we have lived since and to deny God's work in the present. God is calling us forward in faith and we do so through the example of those faithful who have gone before us, like Abraham and Sarah, an example of faith even for Jesus, who sets an example for us of what it means to long for and work for a future where God is the builder and architect, even if we never get to see it in this life.

Inwardly, faith is the confidence that God's promises of justice, peace, mercy, and salvation are true - confidence that ultimately the Church will not die, that God has a plan and a future for us and for the Church even if we can't perceive it. Confidence, even if we need to be reminded, that we are made in the image of God, that we belong to God and one another.

Outwardly, we are faithful. We show up each week, longing for a word from God, for a place of belonging, for connection to that which is larger than we are.

Inwardly, faith is the confidence that God's promises of justice, peace, mercy, and salvation are true.

Outwardly, we are faithful as we show up to care for refugees and serve meals to those who are hungry. Outwardly we are faithful when we pray and show up for one another in times of suffering and need.

Inwardly, faith is the confidence that God's promises of justice, peace, mercy, and salvation are true - not just for us but for all - not just one day, but this day - in hope.

Outwardly we work for justice, peace, and dignity for all of creation, following Jesus command to love God and love one another. Outwardly we show up to vote, we care for creation, we serve with agencies that advocate for the stranger, hungry, the houseless, the sick, the thirsty, the imprisoned. Outwardly we treat others with dignity and by doing so show the way of hope in Christ in the world.

Sometimes our faith as inward reality fuels the outward actuality, sometimes it is the other way around. When our inward reality falters, we can do the outward work and be refilled. When our outward work seems empty, we turn inward to remember God's promises that move us forward. But they are not really separate ideas, they are together in how Jesus calls us to be in the world. And when both our inward and outward faith falter, we have the example of those like Abraham and Sarah who have gone before us, the grace of Jesus Christ, a gift of love that is freely given to us, and a community that surrounds us to hold us in the midst.

Inwardly and outwardly, faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see. Faith is the inward reality of Christ's saving grace and love for us lived outward in our grace and love for others as we seek God's Kingdom - one day and this day.

Amen.