

August 10, 2025

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Genesis 15:1-6 & Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

A Faith Lived Out

Last fall we had a worship series and adult education time that focused on the book of Hebrews. Our scripture passage this morning comes from a portion of the text that we did not cover during worship, so I was grateful to see it appear as one of the lectionary passages for this week. It is a fitting conclusion to our summer worship series “Stories of Our Faith”, for Hebrews 11 is often titled “By Faith” or “The Meaning of Faith” in Bibles. Following a beautiful definition of faith, this chapter precedes to enumerate a great cloud of witnesses who have demonstrated faithfulness to God, beginning with Abel, Enoch, Noah, followed by Abraham. We will hear this text relating to Abraham, which is a wonderful echo of what we heard Sean read from Genesis. Hebrews 11 then continues with the faith of Moses, other Israelite heroes like Samson, David, and Samuel, and chapter 12 begins with the faith of Jesus. Let us hear now this story of faith from the book of Hebrews:

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 that are not visible.

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 Abraham 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 Abraham looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith, with Sarah’s involvement, Abraham received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised. 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.”

All 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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

“The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see.” This is way the first verse of Hebrews 11 is rendered in *The Message* version of scripture. It is not quite as poetic as what I shared from the NRSVue “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” But I appreciate *The Message* phraseology for its direct nature.

Faith is a trust in God that is a fundamental fact of existence. For those of us who profess to be a people of faith of any sort – Jewish, Christian, Muslim - it is a fundamental fact of existence. It is the firm foundation on which our life is based. It is our handle on what we can’t see. And there is oh so much that we can’t see. Faith is the characteristic of our lives that enables us to endure and persevere in the face of hardship and difficult circumstances. It allows us to speak up, step out and take risks, confident that God’s desire for a world where all know love, peace, justice and mercy will not fail to be achieved despite all evidence to the contrary.

Abraham and Sarah (and their descendants Isaac and Jacob) are lifted up throughout scripture as paragons of faithfulness to God; of those who displayed trust despite the daunting challenges of what they were being called to do. Abraham is referenced 69 times in the New Testament. And while seven of these are in Hebrews, all four Gospels, the letters of Paul and the pastoral epistles mention the faith of Abraham as part our lineage as disciples of Christ. I do want to note, that the book of Hebrews is one of the few places in the New Testament that Abraham’s wife Sarah is mentioned. I hope you caught the reference to her. This is one of my favorite lines in scripture... the definition of understatement: “By faith, with Sarah’s involvement, Abraham received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised.” With Sarah’s involvement...and that folks is a sermon for another day.

I think it is important to note that our scripture doesn’t say that those who lived by faith - our heroes and heroines of faith – never had moments of doubt or struggled with fears. We know that Abraham and Sarah, and all of those listed in this great cloud, had struggles and times when they were unable to understand how God’s plan for their life would play out. And yet, the trajectory of their faith was one of trust.

One of my favorite quotes about faith comes not from a famous religious figure, but from nuclear physicist Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb. He says, “When you get to the end of all the light you know and it’s time to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things shall happen: either you will be given something solid to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly.”¹

¹ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/304427.Edward_Teller

I love this quote because, like the examples of Abraham and Sarah, it recognizes that the path to faithfulness is not necessarily knowing what the end result will be, rather it is the willingness to take the first step is faith. That is what Abraham and Sarah modeled for us, a faith lived out, leaving their homes and staking out a new path with the promise of land and descendants and that God would journey with them, even when the journey is hard. Later in Chapter 11, as the author of Hebrews is sharing about the faith of some of the familiar names of Old Testament scriptures, the author enumerates the hardships many faced - everything from mocking to imprisonment to torture to death.

It was this last section of Hebrews 11 that reminded me of the stories of faith from those who wrote the Theological Declaration of Barmen, one of the confessions in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions. As I shared in the Time for Children and Wonder this morning, the writings in the Book of Confessions are both historical and contemporary. Each emerged in a particular time and place in response to a particular situation. As the preface to the Book of Confessions states, "Thus, each confessional document should be respected in its historical particularity ... The confessions are not confined to the past, however; they do not simply express what the church was, what it used to believe, and what it once resolved to do. The confessions address the church's current faith and life, declaring contemporary convictions and actions."²

The words of the Theological Declaration of Barmen, including those we will recite this morning in our Affirmation of Faith, are in indeed both historical and declare contemporary convictions and actions. The Barmen Declaration was written to address Christian Nationalism, a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian identity with a national identity. In the case of the Barmen Declaration, it was the ideology of Adolf Hitler's National Socialist agenda. Our Book of Confessions (copies in the PCO library) provides a detailed background on this confession, so I invite you to check it out for more information. I am going to summarize the background because I think it is instructive as we consider the stories of our own faith lived out.

As the Book of Confession³ shares: "The Barmen Declaration was written by a group of church leaders in Germany to help Christians withstand the challenges of a Nazi party that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler's National Socialism. As Hitler consolidated his power, he abolished all political rights and democratic processes: police could detain persons in prison without a trial, search private dwellings without a warrant, seize property, censor publications, tap telephones, and forbid meetings. Hitler soon outlawed all political parties except his own, smashed labor unions, purged universities,

² Preface. *PC(USA) Book of Confessions*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2016, p.iii.

³ Much of this and subsequent sections is from the Introduction to the Barmen Declaration in the *PC(USA) Book of Confessions*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2016, p.280; and The Theological Declaration of Barmen, *PC(USA) Book of Confessions*. Study Edition. Revised. Westminster John Knox Press. 1996; pp 345-352.

replaced the judicial system with his own “People’s Courts,” initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews.” And Hitler obtained the support of church leaders allied with or sympathetic to the German Christians.

The German Christians were a religious sect that were officially organized in 1932, but drew from earlier movements that championed racial purity of the German people and opposed the Marxist movements that were beginning to take hold in Europe. Some German intellectuals, including some theologians, were influential in this Christian movement, especially in relation to its opposition to Communism. Many Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God’s will for the German people.

It didn’t take long for Hitler’s power to extend into the church, and laws were passed that specified required patterns of belief and church membership. The most notorious of these laws made race a direct criterion for church membership by excluding any Christian with Jewish ancestry. Many churches went along with these rules. Nonetheless, some in the churches resisted, including pastors Hans Asmussen, Karl Koch, Karl Iraruer, and Martin Niemöller, and theologian Karl Barth. They called for, and formed, what is known as the Confessing Church Movement.

Following a number of regional meetings, these men assembled 159 representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches, including ordained ministers, church members, and university professors. Their goal was to draft to appeal to the Evangelical churches of Germany to stand firm against the German Christian accommodation to National Socialism. To take a stand against Christian Nationalism. This call to resistance against the theological claims of the Nazi state was adopted and it boldly asserted the freedom of the churches to order and govern themselves. It rejected any arguments that the churches needed another leader besides Jesus Christ.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen contains six propositions, each quoting from Scripture, stating its implications for the present day, and rejecting the false doctrine of the German Christians. The declaration proclaims the church’s freedom in Jesus Christ who is Lord of every area of life. The church obeys him as God’s one and only Word who determines its order, ministry, and relation to the state. The document is structured around six affirmations, accompanied by a corresponding denial...”we reject the false doctrine of...” As the study guide that accompanies the Book of Confessions helpfully highlights: “The “yes” of the gospel, in other words, always entails a necessary “no.” That is there are certain beliefs that stand outside the pale of Christian faith and conviction.”⁴

⁴ *Ibid*, p347

It should be noted that a criticism leveled on the Barmen Declaration was that its focus was the independence of the church viz-a-viz the government, and that it did not call out the Nazi persecution of the Jewish people or other totalitarian measures taken by Hitler and the Nazi party. In subsequent years, individual members of the Confessing Church movement including Martin Niemöller, Heinrich Grüber and Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke more forcefully and openly against the policies of the government. All three were sent to concentration camps. Niemöller and Grüber survived, while Bonhoeffer was hung in the Flossenbürg Concentration camp after surviving stays in Tegel Prison and Buchenwald. Stories of a faith lived out.

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

It wasn't just the pastors, who stepped out in faith, stepped out into the unknown of not knowing whether they would be given something solid to stand on or taught how to fly. For in many of these churches, their pastors had been imprisoned and yet the congregations continued to meet. And the congregation members risked their lives to help Jews who were hiding illegally in Germany. It is reported that a hat would be passed around at the end of meetings into which the congregation would donate identity cards and passbooks. These were then modified by forgers and given to underground Jews so they could pass as legal Berlin citizens. Several members of the Confessing Church were caught and tried for their part in creating forged papers.⁵ So many stories of faiths lived out.

I shared a quote attributed to Martin Niemöller in the words of preparation in the bulletin: "We have no more thought of using our own powers to escape the arm of authorities than had the Apostles of old. No more are we ready to keep silent at man's behest when God commands us to speak. For it is, and must remain, the case that we must obey God rather than man."⁶ Speaking out in faith in obedience to God is something that Niemöller embraced in life, recognizing his hesitancy and the hesitancy of the Confessing Church movement to truly speak out against the political abuses and genocide of Nazi Germany. It was Niemöller who penned the words about speaking out that are often quoted. Words that were translated into English and are immortalized in a display at the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.⁷

First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confessing_Church; <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/confessing-church>; <https://redheadedmonk.com/confessing-church-in-wwii-germany>

⁶ Martin Niemöller, from *Religion in the Reich* by Michael Power, (p. 142), 1939.

⁷ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/quotation-from-martin-niemoller>

Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me

Stories of faith lived out are not just for those whose lives are found in the pages of scripture or history books. Speaking up and stepping out in faith is something each one of us is called to do each and every day. Earlier this summer, the PC(USA) published an FAQ on Christian Nationalism. I'll have copies available after worship this morning and a link in the e-announcements next week. It has some helpful perspectives on the dangers of Christian Nationalism – especially White Christian Nationalism.

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. For Abraham looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them.

I invite you to read through this document and consider the places you may be called to step up and speak out in faith, even if, and maybe especially, if you don't know where you are going. To speak out as witness to the God who promised Abraham and Sarah descendants as numerous as the stars, despite their advanced years. The God who asked us to love our neighbor as ourself. The God who said that we are to welcome and care for the foreigner and stranger, the widow and the orphan. The God who empowered the women at the tomb to step up and speak out that the tomb is empty and that death does not have the last word. The God who has walked with and carried our siblings through the darkest nights as they stepped into the unknown. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 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. Join me in prayer.