

Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:12-22;  
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That opening verse of chapter 11 of the Letters to the Hebrews brings wonderful words, hope-filled words, words that bring peace and comfort . . . but what really, do they mean? More importantly, what does the word “faith” mean? In chapter 11, the word “faith” appears 24 times. And throughout the New Testament, even the writers cannot agree what the word “faith” really means.

Frances Taylor Gench, one of my teachers down at Gettysburg Seminary, wrote in her commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews, “The apostle Paul, for example, speaks of faith as a passive reality. It is essentially trusting acceptance of Christ’s saving work as a gift from God. What Hebrews intends by ‘faith’, however, is closer in meaning to ‘faithfulness’. It speaks of faith as active in obedience. It is that characteristic of the Christian life that enables one both to persevere even in the midst of difficult circumstances and to step out into the unknown with courage and live in a risky and vigorous way.”

Okay. So for the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, at least, faith is an active, not passive, thing. So, what does “active” mean? Being in physical motion; functioning or being capable of functioning; disposed to take action or effectuate change (I go around saying that one a lot); or the one that I think fits our word this morning, being in a state of action, not passive.

And I think in general, Americans are very faithful people, but I also think we have a faith problem. We want to “be active”; we want to participate; we’re very much “hands on” kinds of folks, especially when it comes to our faith, and we struggle with the aspect of faith that is not the doing, not the physical kind and we tend to get that non-physical, non-passive kind of faith confused with “fate” (but I’ll talk about that in just a moment).

But faith, faith is something we can’t see, we can’t taste it or smell it or feel it; it’s an intangible thing but simultaneously it’s very, very real. Captain James T. Kirk in the original *Star Trek* series one time commented that if he couldn’t see it, touch it, or taste it, he didn’t believe in it (my brother-in-law responded “Boy is he ever gonna get fooled!”).

In our lesson from Hebrews, the whole of Chapter 11 (well, actually the entire book) talks about faith. In our lesson this morning as it was read to us, we get some verses cut out from verse 3 to verse 8, because right after that the author begins to give us some examples of individuals who have walked by faith. The first the author uses is Abel (Yes Abel, as in Cain and Abel.) and for reasons we’re never told, God found Abel’s offering to be more pleasing than Cain’s and even though Abel died in verse 4, “through his faith he still speaks”.

The next example the author uses is Enoch – and who really knows who Enoch was? We have to go back to chapter 5 of Genesis. Enoch was the father of Methuselah, but more importantly, Enoch walked with God and again as we heard read, Enoch walked with God and then was no

more because God took him. Enoch was the first person in scripture not to die. Can anyone name the second? (And no, the answer is not Jesus. If you want to know, you'll have to ask me as you leave today!) Enoch's faith is followed by Noah (as in Noah and the ark). By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household. By faith these people lived and served God.

But then we get into the main man of chapter 11, the example up to whom all others are being held, the litmus test of faith (so to speak): Abraham. We were reminded of Abraham in our first lesson this morning, and in that lesson we hear Abraham whining to the Lord God Almighty about not having an heir of his own bloodline to pass his estate on to. And I find this kind of irksome, because when we go back and read Genesis (which is something I highly recommend, by the way, if you haven't already read it) and go back to chapter 14, we read that Abraham's nephew Lot, who has lived with Abraham and Sarah since he was a young boy, Lot, who is now a grown man, has been kidnapped by a bunch of local war lords who are holding him for ransom. Abraham raises up from his own people 318 men who chase down, divide, rout and conquer these self-proclaimed kings. As a reward on their way back home, they stop at the town of Salem (which will later be renamed Jerusalem) and the king of Salem blesses Abraham.

But in our lesson this morning, right after all these wonderful things have happened, Abraham starts to complain to God, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." And God responds, will you please shut up! Okay, not exactly, but theologically that's what God says. What scripture actually says is "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." God then brings Abraham outside and tells him to look up, and this is where we get that wonderful line I'm sure you've heard many, many times before, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. . . . So shall your descendants be."

Now Hebrews goes on to tell the story of how Abraham and Sarah (and yes, it's both of them, they both receive the promise, not just the man) receive the call while they are still in the Land of Ur, back in the middle east, farther east than Israel. Together they receive this call from God because they are both found to be faithful, this call to pack up and move (without telling them where they're going), but to take everything they own and move – by faith – and God will reveal it to you. And so this geriatric man and his menopausal spouse go on to found a nation. "By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah was barren – 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 innumerable grains of sand by the seashore'."

Hebrews goes on after that to give other examples of people who have walked by faith – Jacob and Joseph, Moses, Rahab the prostitute, Gideon, and David – and all these men and women listed in Hebrews, all these men and women who have walked by faith, faith – the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Or as the New Living Translation puts it, "What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see."

One of the best examples I can think of when it comes to walking by faith is that of baptism – especially baptism of a young child. In baptism of a young child, the adults, be it parents or grandparents or godparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, it doesn't matter who,

someone else makes promises on behalf of that child, a child who is far too young to understand and comprehend what is going on. The promises: “In Christian love you have presented this child for Holy Baptism. You should, therefore, faithfully bring this child to the services of God’s house, teach this child the Lord’s Prayer, the Creeds and the Commandments. As this child grows in years, you should place in his or her hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for his or her instruction in the Christian faith, that, living in the covenant their baptism and the communion with the Church, this child might lead a godly life until the day of Jesus Christ.” And then comes a very important part, when those adults are asked on behalf of that child: “Do you promise to fulfill these obligations?” Faith.

Now that child will, hopefully, be brought up in faith, as those adults have promised. That child will, at least here at Trinity, eventually go into a class commonly known as confirmation but better called the “affirmation of baptism class”. Because it’s in that affirmation of baptism class that that child, now a young adult, learns to take on for him or herself those promises that were made on their behalf. That is when that individual claims for his or her own the faith that they have been raised in.

Sometimes, though, we do get “faith” mixed up with “fate”. We think because God has said something will happen and it does, that everything that happens is of God’s doing – our birthing and our dying, our health or our illness, our spouse or lack thereof, our employment, our housing, our schooling – all of that reminds me of a movie that I find to be very much about faith (although you might not agree with me). The movie *The Thirteenth Warrior* takes place in the tenth century and is about a bunch of Vikings who go to fight an evil, and who have with them an ambassador from one of the Arabian countries. As they are about to go into battle, the Viking warrior turns to the ambassador, who is a little nervous about all of this, and the Viking warrior says, explaining fate not faith, “The old father wove your skein of life a long time ago. Go and hide in a hole if you wish, but you won’t live one instant longer. Your fate is fixed.”

But “fate” works against “faith”. Fate says, it doesn’t matter what I do because it’s already been decided and I can’t change a thing. Faith says, It doesn’t matter what I do because I’m already forgiven, so I’m going to do whatever it is I believe God wants me to do. I may not know the why or the outcome, but I trust that God is with me in all that I do.

So let us go forth from this place, guided not by fate but by faith, that we too might rejoice in the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Amen.