

Sermon for August 28, 2016
"Faith: Ancients Commended"

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen. This is what the ancients were commended for." (Hebrews 11:1-2) This month we have been pondering this definition of faith. What is faith? Three weeks ago we saw that faith is something that is lived out. The best definition of faith is a life lived in faith. It is not just a state of mind it is a spiritual gift that impels us to action; to step out in faith.

Two weeks ago we pondered faith as an assurance of things hoped for. God has promised us that all our hopes for joy and peace and love will be realized. In Jesus those promises have been fulfilled. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We can look to him and the great cloud of witnesses to give us assurance that our greatest hopes will come to pass.

Last week we consider faith as a conviction of things unseen. We saw how though Jesus we can see God. We can know the holy infinite Creator of the universe. With Jesus as God in the flesh, we can have a conviction of things not seen with the eye.

Today we consider this faith by which the ancients were commended. Remember back in the first sermon I said that faith is best defined by looking at examples of it. In chapter 13 the book of Hebrews basically tries to give an operational definition of what this faith is when lived out. So what does this faith, by which the ancients were commended, look like?

The most outstanding characteristic of this faith is love. That should not be surprising. After all Jesus told us to love our neighbors and even our enemies. Paul's writings emphasize the centrality and important of love. He said of all the gifts of the Spirit the greatest is love. John went as far as to say, "God is Love!"

Hebrews specifically says "Keep loving one another as brothers (and sisters)." The emphasis here is on loving fellow members of the church. Sometimes that is easier than at others times. But it goes on the say, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." This is an obvious reference to Abraham and Sarah showing hospitality to the three strangers who turned out to be God and two angels. You might recall from a few Sundays back or our summer study of hospitality, that they took a risk to care for these strangers. In ancient times travelers were vulnerable, so God's people are called to provide for their needs and even risk their lives to protect them.

What does this mean to us in our day? Things are different now. There is a Days Inn and McDonalds, or some other version, at every exit, and if their car breaks down they have a cell phone. The situation is not the same as in ancient times. Even international travelers can always run to the embassy. They have the protection of law.

But there are people forced to leave their homeland because of war or natural disasters or poverty. As Christians we should seek to help these people. The plight of the refugees fleeing Africa is an example of this. They are fleeing war and are often taken advantage of by people who take their money and possessions and then put them in leaky rafts to sail across the Mediterranean. As Christians we are called to welcome and help these people. As Christians we are called to support national and state policies that would welcome these people. We are also called to oppose policies that would not show hospitality. This is where faith comes in. We are called to even take risks to show that love and hospitality to sojourners.

The faith for which the ancients were commended is a faith that calls us to love. It also calls us to stand in solidarity with prisoner and the oppressed. It says, "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." It doesn't just say we should remember prisoners, but that we should remember them "as if you were their fellow prisoners." Of course this means we should be involved in ministry with people in prison,

but it means more. For the early church many of them were imprisoned for the faith including the Apostle Paul, and the church is called to be in solidarity with them. In the same way we are called to remember those who are mistreated, or oppressed, as if we were the ones suffering.

What does this solidarity with the prisoners and the oppressed look like? The story is told that when the Nazis came into Denmark they ordered that all the Jews wear yellow stars of David to identify them. The next day King Christian X appeared in public wearing a yellow star and by the end of the day all the people of Denmark were wearing them. Alas, the story is only legend. The truth is that the Nazis did not require Jews in Denmark to wear yellow stars of David. But the legend captures the truth of the solidarity that the king and people of Denmark had with their persecuted Jewish countrymen and women. During the war the people of Denmark, at great risk to themselves, either hid or smuggled out of the country all but a few hundred of the Jews that lived there.

Of course Jesus is the ultimate example of this solidarity. He left to glories of Heaven and was born a homeless refugee for us. Even though he was innocent, he allowed himself to be condemned and executed as a common thief. In the portion of chapter 13 that we skipped, it speaks of Jesus being taken out of the city to be killed for our sins. Since he was taken out, it says we need to go out to be where he is. The life of faith will take us out of the protecting walls to stand in solidarity with those who are imprisoned and mistreated just as Jesus came to stand in solidarity with us.

Hebrews goes on to describe this life of faith by saying some pretty basic things like: honor marriage and do not love money. At least I hope that is pretty basic. But then it concludes, “¹⁵Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.” Our lives as Christians should be a praise to God.

I know when we think of praise we think of singing or making music. But actions can be praise, words, even attitudes, can be a praise to God. The life lived in faith is an aria, a psalm, a ballad that gives a testimony of the goodness of God.

But this is a “sacrifice of praise.” What is a sacrifice? In Biblical times they slaughtered animals or presented grains and fruits and wine on an altar as a gift to God. Our lives should be an offering to God. Faith is lived out by making our lives a gift to God that glorifies God and proclaims God’s grace and love.

What is faith? It is the assurance of things hoped for a conviction of unseen things and by it our ancestors in the faith were approved. This month we have seen that faith is something that is lived out. It is an assurance and a conviction that impels us to serve God. When we step out in faith we make our lives a sacrifice of praise that glorifies God.

What is faith? Perhaps we need to flip everything. We have talked about it in terms of what we get out of it. We get an assurance and a confidence that gives us hope and peace in the face of life’s ups and downs. And faith, ultimate trust, in God does give us confidence to face life with tranquility and hope.

Perhaps faith is not really about what we get, but what we give. We give ourselves to God in praise and service. We put ourselves in God’s hands to be used as God sees fit. We give of ourselves for others trusting in God.

What is Faith? Yes, it is the assurance of thing hoped for and the conviction of things unseen by which the ancients were approved. But words fail to express its true meaning and depth. I know I have been talking for a month about it and I feel these four sermons are woefully inadequate to define faith. I am sure any of you could do a better job than I have done.

Hey, here’s an idea! You preach the meaning of faith! You tell me what faith is. Yes, all of you, live your lives as a soliloquy, a ballad to the meaning of faith. Let your lives proclaim and exemplify faith in God. Now, that will preach!