

Sermon for August 21, 2016
"Faith: Conviction of Things Not Seen"

Hebrews 12:18-29

"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? Two 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.

Last week 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.

Today we consider faith as a conviction of things unseen. In chapter 11 Hebrews says, "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." No human was there at creation to witness it, yet we believe that God made all things. But what about belief in God? God cannot be seen. You can't measure God. The Divine cannot be quantified and reduced to an equation like gravity or light or even the universe. How can we, not just believe in God, but claim to have a relationship with an infinite, undefinable, unknowable, unseen entity? Only by faith can we have a conviction about such unseen things.

The ancient Israelites may not have seen God, but they had seen a lot. By the time they arrived at Mt. Sinai they had seen the plagues against Egypt. They had been led by a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. They had seen the Red Sea parted and had walked across on dry ground. They had seen the mightiest army in the world bent on enslaving them destroyed as the waters closed in on them.

Then they came to Mount Sinai, and they saw the glory of God descend on the mountain. A great cloud came down. And God spoke and God's voice thundered so much that it frightened the people. And they had a right to be frightened. God had told them and no one but Moses could come onto the mountain. Everyone else even the animals were forbidden from approaching the mountain of God.

God was teaching the Israelites that God is Holy! The Almighty was not like the gods of the Egyptians or the Canaanites or any other gods. The Almighty could not be treated like an idol that you pick up and put where you want and do with as you please. God is the one in charge and God calls the shots. God is to be respected and honored and worshipped at the deepest levels of the heart. God is not to be trifled with or manipulated or ordered around!

The writer of Hebrews makes the point that in Christ things have changed. God is no less holy, but God can now be approached because God the Almighty came to us. Because of Jesus Christ we are not like the Israelites who stood frightened at the base of Mt. Sinai. We are like those who ascend Mt. Zion to worship in the temple. But we are not talking here about an earthly Jerusalem. We are talking about a heavenly Jerusalem.

In Jesus, the Almighty came to us. Through Christ, who is our go between, we can approach God. Jesus came as the Word, the mind of God, made flesh. Through Jesus we have access to God Almighty. Hebrews describes this in terms of Jesus in Heaven interceding for us.

We no longer cower before the glory of God in terror. But in reverent respect we bask in that Glory! Through the Holy Spirit we know the Almighty living God living in us!

So were the ancient Hebrews wrong about the nature of God? No, God is still the holy, infinite, God of the cosmos. God is the one who spoke the universe into existence. In Hebrew the word for holy is "*kadosh*." It literally means "set apart, different from." God is different from all that we know. God is powerful and set apart.

The story of the children of Israel being banned from the Mountain of God was an attempt to communicate that holiness. God is still holy and is to be revered. As the contemporary hymn says, "Our God is an awesome God." We should stand in awe and wonder of God's holiness.

But at the same time God is with us. The story of the Exodus is the story of God coming to the children of Abraham. God makes God's awesome and holy presence known in an act of liberation. In the same way in Christ God made God's awesome presence known in an act of liberation. Just as God set the children of Israel free from slavery, in Christ we have been set free from sin and death to know abundant and eternal life. In Jesus and through the Holy Spirit the holy presence of God has been revealed to us!

Do you realize how profound this is? People have sought through the ages to know God. This desire has led to religions and philosophies of all kinds. People made sacrifices and devoted themselves to try to approach God.

But God cannot be reached by human means. You can never be enlightened or holy enough to ascend to God. God is unapproachable by human beings in their weakness.

But in Jesus the Almighty God, high and lifted up, has come down to us. Born as a baby, lived as a man, died as falsely accused, and raised eternal. God has come to us so that the unapproachable God of the Universe could be embraced by the residents of one small planet. God came so that you could embrace the unapproachable God of the Cosmos.

Praise God we can know God! We all know what it is like to have a breach in a relationship with someone significant in our lives. Imagine a person who has a falling out with their parent. Through their own acts of betrayal and disrespect the relationship is injured seemingly beyond repair. The relationship deteriorates and for years they do not communicate.

Then the parent seeks out the child. The parent finds the child and the parent forgives all the acts of betrayal and disrespect. The parent reaches out to the child. And the child falls into the parent's arms.

We were alienated from our Heavenly Father by our sinful acts of betrayal and disrespect. But in Christ, God the Father sought us out. Through the Holy Spirit, God has reached out to embrace us. We are reconciled with our Heavenly Father. We have been forgiven and we can know God!

Let's not squander the opportunity we have! We can know God! If we will but open ourselves to the presence of the Almighty of the Cosmos, we can know communion with God. Seek God in nature. God is in everything, but often we fail to see God. Take the time to see the sunrise or sunset or flowers or a storm cloud. Too often in our busy lives we do not take time to listen to God. Mother Teresa said, "We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass- grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls."

Seek God in other people. We were all created in God's image. Look for that image of God. Seek to know them and through your love for them to love God.

Seek God in prayer and study. Read the Bible and other religious books. Attend Sunday School or a Bible Study. Discuss what you learn with others to learn from them.

Every day is a new opportunity to know God. Hebrews admonishes us to seize the opportunity we have in Christ and in the Holy Spirit to know God. Seize that opportunity today. God is here! Open your heart and mind! By faith you can have a conviction of unseen things; a relationship with God!