

Sermon for August 7, 2016

"Faith: What is It?"

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-19

What is Faith? "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen." Some have claimed that this is the best definition of faith ever given. Faith is a sureness that the promises of God which we hope for are true. It is the conviction that unseen things, like grace, love, and even God, exist. It is the capacity, the gift, to believe in things that cannot be proven. Things like Christ saves, and that he will come again. The ability to believe in these things even when all the evidence argues against them.

"By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the hand of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are invisible." Who made the world? We Christians and our Jewish and Islamic sisters and brothers say, "God did!" But on what proof? No human was there to witness it. The evidence could also support other theories. We are convinced that God spoke the worlds into existence because of faith.

If this is such a good definition of faith, why didn't the author of Hebrews stop there? Instead of stopping with this beautiful definition, the author goes on to site example after example of lives lived in faith. You see, faith is more than an intellectual assent to the existence of some unseen or unprovable thing. Faith is an action. Faith is an assurance that effects what one does. It is a conviction that is lived out. The formal definition is only the beginning. The best explanation of Faith is by example.

So the author of Hebrews gives us examples or testimonies of faith in others. He, or she, gives examples of how our ancestors in the faith were approved by faith. These examples demonstrate for us faith at work. And it is these examples of real life faith that move us to faith.

What is faith? Consider Abraham and Sarah. One day God came to Abraham and said, "Leave your homeland and follow me to a land I will give you." Abraham had a comfortable life. He was well established. Why should he leave? But he followed God anyway. He had no proof that God was not lying to him or playing him for the fool. By faith he took a chance and wandered the rest of his life not knowing for sure where he was headed, but trusting God to lead him.

One day God promised to make Sarah and Abraham a great nation and said Sarah would have a son. They were old by this time. Who was God kidding? Sarah laughed. By faith they listened to God and trusted. And in her old age Sarah conceived and bore a son just as God had promised.

Then one day God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. What?! Sacrifice the child that was his only heir? Sacrifice the child that God had promised? Without Isaac how would God make Abraham and Sarah a great nation? It just did not make any sense. But by faith Abraham offered up Isaac. He trusted that the Almighty knew what to do. Perhaps God would even raise him back to life. And in a sense God did. In the process God taught Abraham and all who followed, that God's people don't take human lives.

God made Abraham a great nation and gave his children a great land. It didn't make sense at the time. Abraham could not see how wandering could give him a land of promise. He couldn't see how God would make a great nation out of a barren woman. And the command to sacrifice Isaac made even less sense. But by faith Sarah and Abraham accepted God's promises and guidance. And God made a great nation out of Sarah and Abraham. Their faith was well founded for God's promises came true.

What is faith? Consider early church. Jesus had promised that he would be with them always. But it was hard to believe this truth at times. The evidence seemed to point toward the conclusion that Christ had abandoned them. Persecution after persecution came at the

Christians. The church was so small, just a hand full of converts here and there. Any reasonable gambler would have bet against them. First they were thrown out of the Synagogues, then they were stoned. Finally, they were fed to the lions.

Jesus had said he would return and do away with all evil. Well, they waited, and waited, and waited. It seemed he would never come back, and things kept getting worse. The objective evidence was that Jesus would not come back. Then the first generation died off and another.

By faith they held true to their beliefs. Despite the empirical evidence, they were sure that Christ was with them and they held to the conviction that he would come again. But their faith in Christ amazed those who were killing them. And the Roman persecutors became believers. The stories of the faith of the Martyrs inspired others. And by faith the church was sustained and grew.

What is faith? I think of a woman I met once who was incapacitated by the ravages of old age, diabetes, and a score of other ailments. But there was a smile on her face. And there was always a song of praise on her lips. She greeted visitors with a happy voice. And she thanked God for how blessed she is.

This doesn't make sense!?! Blessed? How? Is being confined to a wheelchair a blessing? Is the threat of constant infection and amputation a reason to give thanks? Are daily insulin injections a gift from God?

She was joyful because she was sure of some unseen things. She was sure of God's love for her. She had the conviction that all things work together for good for God's people. (Rom. 8:28) We can't see empirical evidence of these things, but she was sure of their truth. By faith she accepted God's promises of care and protection. By faith she knew a joy in life that even I, a preacher, find myself longing for.

What is faith? It is the assurance that the promises of God are true. Promises like: Jesus gives us eternal life. Christ will always be with us. God will protect us and care for us. God can take even the worst event in our lives and use it to our benefit. The objective variables may not support these claims. When we look at the world, our observations may lead us toward the conclusion that God has abandoned us. But faith enables us to trust these truths despite evidence to the contrary.

Faith is the belief that things we cannot see exist. It is the conviction that leads the Astrophysicist who is studying the Big Bang to believe that God was the author of the universe. It is the force of Spirit that leads the poverty stricken person to believe that they are rich in Christ. It is the hope that convinces an invalid that she is blessed. It is the spiritual force that enables us to grasp and hold on to intangibles like grace, hope, love, peace ... God.

If we believe in only what we can prove and what we can see, we limit ourselves. These examples of faith show us how people are able to reach beyond themselves to something greater. You can't prove beyond the shadow of a doubt or in a scientific manner that God exists or that God is good to us. All you can do trust in God. And once we do that the power of God to make us truly alive is set free within us! Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

Faith is a gift given to us in grace. If you want this gift, just ask God. Do you want an assurance of all the things you most deeply hope for and a conviction that unseen wonders exist? Then ask, and God, the author of all faith, will bless you as Abraham and Sarah and many others were blessed. When John Wesley first encountered the Moravians he was shamed by their faith. Their faith threw into contrast his own lack of faith so much so that he decided to quite preaching. One of the Moravians, Peter Bohler, advised him to keep on preaching. Wesley asked how he could preach without faith. Bohler said, "Preach faith till you have faith." If you find you lack faith, try stepping out in faith, then you will find it.