

## ***Believing is Seeing***

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

August 12, 2007

### **I.**

Today I want to talk about the New Testament reading from Hebrews rather than the Gospel. This reading discusses faith, a small word with great significance. And we will hear that while the world insists that seeing is believing, for people of faith it is the opposite. Believing is seeing.

This is an important subject because faith has gotten a bad rap in modern times. Today many people in the secular world regard faith as a form of simple mindedness, a type of uncritical thinking that is beneath us as so-called sophisticated and educated people. And even among believers, the idea and meaning of faith sometimes is not fully understood.

So, we will start with our reading from Hebrews as a point of departure for a larger examination that raises questions such as: What is faith and how do we understand it? How do we get faith? How does faith help us get through life? How do we live in faith day by day?

The answers to these questions will touch upon what draws us to prayer and worship. They reach to the basic question of why we are even here. Faith calls us to consider what motivates our thoughts about God, and what we feel when we share in the Eucharist, and what you think about when you hear my sermons. Perhaps I should withdraw that last observation.

### **II.**

Let's look at this reading. The first three verses, on the page two of your bulletin insert, say, "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." The reading then goes on to describe Abraham's faith in God's promises that he would be the father of a nation, and would begin the journey that eventually would lead to the promised land.

For our purposes the first verse is important. It says, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Again, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

But, obviously, this does not mean assurance of anything we might hope for. I hope the Saints win the Super Bowl, but there is no assurance of that. And it doesn't mean the conviction of all things not seen. I cannot see into the future, and thus cannot have convictions about what the future will bring.

So, while the words "assurance" and "conviction" are important, we see that a key word also is "things." In terms of faith, our assurances and our convictions must be related to certain things, but not all things. And as we identify those "things," we will have a better understanding of the elements and aspects of Christian faith.

### **III.**

But before we get into what faith is, it could be helpful to know what faith is not. First, and perhaps most importantly, faith is not a way to take things that have no reality and make them real, or visa versa. Some people think that just believing or disbelieving something makes it so. This is wrong. Things are so, or not so, whether or not we believe they are. The truth is the truth and our belief or unbelief neither creates the truth nor suppresses it.

This can be a perilous trap for post-modern liberal theology, which seems to insist that all truth is grounded in cultural and social relevance. In these circles faith and truth are constantly being revised to reflect the changing values and standards of society. For me, that is not faith. It is wishful thinking.

On a different part of the theological spectrum, faith also is not merely an emotion that overpowers the senses, and causes people to become wrapped up in how they personally are responding to the moment instead of focusing on the source of their faith and object of their worship. Certainly the Holy Spirit can lead us in prayer and be present in worship, but the Spirit cannot just be summoned on demand.

And faith is not just a good guess based on our best estimates. It is not susceptible to scientific analysis, calculations, or theories of probability. We cannot claim, for example, that we have faith merely because the odds are that Scripture is true, or because it is more likely than not that Scripture is true.

This points to a similar error. Faith is not an insurance policy. I have heard people say they did not know if they believed in God, but the smarter move was to conduct their lives as though God existed because they think they would have coverage if that turned out to be the case. This is not faith, but for people who believe in this way, there still is hope. Over the years I have seen people come to church for all the wrong reasons, and then become true believers after hearing the Word.

In this sense, faith also is not some human illusion that we conjure up in our own hearts from our own resources that we call belief, and then treat as genuine faith. Sometimes people want to believe, but they aren't sure they do or how to go about it, and so they profess faith and join the church much as someone would agree to the bylaws of an organization and then join it. Again, however, there is hope. A faith that is fabricated from within can ripen into a true faith as the Holy Spirit works its wondrous ways.

Finally, and this is important but perhaps difficult to appreciate, faith has nothing to do with our present circumstances. If we experience hardship our faith should not suffer. We never were promised freedom from hardship. And if we are blessed we certainly can thank God, but we should not become presumptuous in our faith, again for the same reason.

#### **IV.**

So, with that background, let's look at faith in more detail. Our reading about Abraham showed that faith in the Old Testament was the certainty of God's promises eventually being fulfilled. Faith in this setting was expressed as a relationship between God and the people of Israel as a nation, not as individuals. That reading also mentions faith in things past, such as how God created the universe.

That story about Abraham has much to commend it. But in the time left, I want to move forward in the Bible and consider New Testament faith, which focuses on individual righteousness, and which looks at faith for the future. This involves both what faith does, and what faith is.

In short, Faith acts in our lives by causing us to know and believe in existing realities for which we have no evidence, but which are no less real merely because they are beyond our ability to touch, see, or understand through our powers of reason.

And these unseen realities are God's promises of salvation and eternal life to us through Jesus Christ, and God's absolute trustworthiness in bringing these promises to completion. These are some of the "things" I mentioned earlier that are the objects of our assurance and conviction.

This means that faith comes to us from above, as a gift, through God's grace. It is not something we can create or manufacture through our own efforts other than to respond in our humble acceptance of God's gift of salvation through Christ. Understood in this way, faith has two components; trust and belief on our parts, and righteousness and reliability on God's part.

But our trust and belief is not just acceptance of church doctrine or the content of Scripture alone, although both are important. We express faith with our hearts as well as our heads, and thus it involves both knowledge and a relationship. Through faith we study and we accept, but also go beyond, theological propositions in Scripture and the creeds, and are transformed as we grow into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

As a result, faith is more than either an abstract virtue or objective principle. It also actually is a thing, a life-giving energy at work within us as we respond to the saving work of Christ on the cross. It is an attitude of hope about the future that enables us to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await completion of God's purpose for us and the world. And it reaffirms our dependence on the activity of God in Christ.

And again, I ask you to remember that faith is not a human characteristic that exists only after we develop it within ourselves. Rather, it is God's gift, and according to the Book of Hebrews it is a pre-existing deposit in the world, made and perfected by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago, upon which we can draw to sustain us as we live the Christian life.

## **V.**

This Christian life also is part of faith. Certainly faith defines our hope in the next world, and the idea of faith frequently is expressed in the context of salvation and eternal life. But what about this world? What about the here and now?

Well, here we can look at Christ's life, in addition to his death and resurrection. Scripture tells us that during his life Jesus carried out a ministry of preaching and teaching that revealed the will of God as to how we should live our lives and love each other in preparation for the coming of God's kingdom on earth.

If we accept that, then we see that faith also is a way of life that enables us to grow in our relationship with Christ. It is a disposition that affects how we live our lives all day, every day. It is not just something that we mentally prepare ourselves to do and experience on Sunday, and then go back to business as usual on Monday.

Faith in our daily lives requires obedience and discipline, which also can require perseverance. This means that our faith is dynamic. It increases and draws strength from itself as we go out into the community to help others, as we extend ourselves in love to each other, and as we work to build up the church as Christ's body. It sustains us as we respond in gratitude through prayer and seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit as our personal navigator through the seas of life, whether they be stormy or calm.

## **VI.**

Martin Luther, the great sixteenth century reformer, described the life of faith in terms of a ship. He said that faith is not just believing that the ship exists, but it also means stepping onto that ship, and putting ourselves to sea, and entrusting ourselves to it.

God is that ship, the perfect ship. And he has given us the perfect gift in his Son, Jesus Christ. He calls us to step on board and accept that gift. As we do we experience the wonder of faith, and we are united in a relationship with Christ and his love. *Amen.*