

Faith Now

Hebrews 11:1-3, 6, 8-16

August 15, 2010

I.

You all know that I frequently preach about the Gospel. But today I feel called to talk about our New Testament reading from the Book of Hebrews. That reading speaks about faith, a small word of great significance.

And this is an important subject because faith has gotten a bad rap in modern times. Today many people in the secular world dismiss 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 meaning of faith sometimes seems distant.

So, we start with our reading from Hebrews as a point of departure that leads us to think about what faith is, how we even get faith to begin with, and what faith means to us day by day.

And as we reflect on these eternal questions, we can consider what draws us to prayer and worship. We can ask why we are even here in church. Contemplating our faith can call us to examine, for example, what motivates our thoughts about God, what we feel when we share in the Eucharist, and how we regard our common life together here at St. Thomas.

II.

We might begin by narrowing the scope of our inquiry. Faith can have several meanings. In a very general sense it can refer to a collectively shared belief system. We are of the Christian faith. We have friends of the Jewish faith. But those broad categories do not define faith as used in today's reading.

And of course, faith in the Old Testament had its own meaning because at that time Jesus Christ had not yet come to give his life for our sins. As a result, Old Testament faith was not a belief in salvation as we understand it, but rather a belief in the certainty of receiving what God had promised, but not yet provided. Again, that is not the type of faith I will talk about today.

There also is the enduring Christian doctrine of faith that Christ's death and resurrection offer salvation and everlasting life to all who accept Jesus as their savior (Jn. 3:16, Ro. 1:16, Eph. 2:8). That belief is the cornerstone of Christianity, but even so, it still is not quite what I mean by faith for purposes of today's sermon.

That's because we can make a further distinction between the saving faith that gives us comfort about the next world, and the living faith that sustains us in this world. Faith in what happens when we die certainly is part of what we believe, but Scripture also tells us that faith can be an active force in our lives before that time.

So, let's focus on the meaning of faith that applies to us right now, that we feel and experience right now, and that governs and directs our lives in a real way right now.

III.

We can start with today's New Testament reading. The first verse is important. It's on the bottom of page three of your bulletin insert. 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. We hope the Saints win the Super Bowl again, but there is no assurance of that. And it doesn't extend to the conviction of all things that are not seen. Erroneous weather reports might be examples of that.

And so before we really get into what faith is, we might further consider what faith is not. When we eliminate some of the ways in which faith could be misunderstood, we can discern what is left with greater clarity.

For example, and this is an easy one, if I drop something I have faith it will fall to the ground. But faith in the certainty of gravity is not spiritual faith. And if I board an airplane I have faith that the pilots, the aircraft, the airline will get me to my destination, even though there is a small statistical uncertainty. Again, faith in the odds is not spiritual faith.

Faith also is not a way to take false ideas and make them true. Merely believing or disbelieving something through our own logic or wishful thinking does not necessarily make it so or not so. Truth is the truth, and our own belief or unbelief neither creates the truth nor suppresses it.

And, as an aside, this can be a trap for post-modern liberal theology, which seems to insist that 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 evidence of godly faith, but rather worldly agendas.

And there are some other things we know are not faith. Faith is not like a spare tire, only to be used in emergencies. Faith is not like a bus or train, only to be ridden when it goes our way. Faith is not a light switch, to be turned off and on.

Faith also is not an insurance policy. I have known people who were not sure they believed what the Bible teaches, but decided the safer choice was to go along with it because it might turn out to be true. This is not true faith; God knows what they are doing. But there still is hope for them. If we proclaim the Word to them, the Holy Spirit can take it from there and transform their uncertainty into Christian belief.

Finally, and this can be difficult to accept, faith has nothing to do with our present circumstances. Our faith should not suffer if we experience hardship. Instead, we can take comfort in verse six of our reading, which cautions that "without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists," but then promises "that he rewards those who seek him."

IV.

And so the meaning of faith starts with the idea of seeking a relationship with God, right now, that leads us in a way of life, right now. And that relationship and way of life can take us through uncertainties in reliance on God's sovereign authority over our lives and his love for us.

Spiritual faith is based in a belief and trust in God that comes to us through God's grace. We do not create or manufacture it through our own efforts other than to respond in humble acceptance of God's grace in the gift of our lives, God's blessing of creation around us, and God's promise of a relationship with us.

And God's grace is not arbitrary. God does not just decide that some people will have faith and others will not. The Book of Hebrews also tells us that faith is a pre-existing deposit in the world, made and perfected by Jesus Christ, upon which we can draw to sustain us as we live the Christian life (12:2).

Faith proceeds from Christ and includes his faith in us. It is important to always remember that our faith would mean nothing unless Christ first had faith in us.

And so we draw on that deposit of his faith with both our heads and our hearts. With our heads we can make decisions to open ourselves to Jesus by Christian practices such as prayer, reading the Bible, coming to church, and helping others in need. That's a start.

But faith also goes beyond these objective things, and makes itself known in our hearts. Through God's response to us we receive a life-giving energy that works within us as we acknowledge Jesus Christ in our lives. This leads to an attitude of hope for the future that helps us live now with confidence in newness and fullness of life. We accept and cherish our dependence on the activity of God in Christ. And through this transformation we know God's peace.

We also might think about faith by considering the African impala. I am told that in a single leap the impala can go ten feet high and cover a distance of thirty feet. But yet these powerful animals can be kept in any zoo with a five foot high solid wall. They will not jump out if they cannot see where they will land.

This illustrates that spiritual faith also is the ability to trust what we cannot see. It's what we mean when we step out in faith, not knowing for sure where we will land, but confident in our belief that God will be with us. And with that faith we can be freed from life's walls and enclosures that keep us from truly living into what God wants for us.

And so 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 understand through our powers of reason. Faith is the inner conviction of God's truth unencumbered by our own limited knowledge.

V.

Let me mention one more passage from the Book of Hebrews. The writer tells us to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (12:1) This race leads us anywhere and everywhere through creation with God as our coach. I have said before that the starting blocks are in this world, and the finish line is in the next.

But the point here is that the fuel we burn as we run that race now is faith. It is an inexhaustible source of endurance that always sustains us. It keeps us going, and even though at times it might seem to run out, that only is illusory. God always is there to fill us back up again whenever we ask.

We often hear from skeptics that they must see in order to believe. For people of faith, however, the opposite is true. We first believe, and then we see. *Amen.*