

Season after Pentecost
Hebrews: Week 5
September 6, 2015
Haven Lutheran Church
Readings: Hebrews 11: 1-16, 12: 1-2

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It’s a beautiful thought that has found its way onto samplers, pillows and T-shirts. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The Preacher of Hebrews offered it as encouragement for his weary and worrying congregation. It’s a definition of faith that steps beyond a “trusting acceptance of Christ’s saving work as a gift from God.”¹ The Preacher’s idea of faith is closer to what we’d call “faithfulness.” Faith, as he speaks of it, is the active ingredient of “the Christian life that enables one both to persevere even in the midst of difficult circumstances and to step out into the unknown with courage to live in a risky and vigorous way.”² Or as another preacher puts it, Hebrews speaks of a faith that “requires both holding fast and moving forward,” holding tight to the promises of God and moving forward into the future which is God’s.³

The Hebrews Preacher must have imagined the glassy eyes or doubtful expressions of his congregation. He wisely figured “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” was just a nice sounding sentiment that might seem empty without a few examples. So the Hebrew’s Preacher pulls out the family photo album, just like some folks may be doing at family reunions this weekend. He goes back so far that there are only word sketches of those first ancestors:

By faith Abel, the son of Adam and Eve, offered the first of his crops to God in thanksgiving and God was pleased by Abel’s gift. He was killed by his jealous brother Cain, but Abel’s faith still speaks.

By faith Enoch, the 7th patriarch walked with God. It was said he lived 365 years and did not die but was taken by God.

By faith Noah built an ark at God command even though the flooding the Lord spoke of was yet unseen.

By faith Abraham and Sarah left their homeland to wander toward an unknown new home. Holding on to the promises of God, they were strangers in other lands. When it seemed utterly impossible, Abraham and Sarah had a son, the first of the promised descendants who were to number as many as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the shore.

Before we can get overly romantic about the lives of our ancestors, the Preacher reminds us that all of these died in faith without having seen the final prize — the world redeemed, in God’s presence and back in the peace of Eden. But that does not make their efforts or lives meaningless. They had the courage of faith to move toward God unencumbered by what they had left behind and undaunted by what they could not yet see. And though they did not live to see the city God prepared for them, they know it now. The same for Moses, Judges, King David, Prophets, the Preacher points out as he quickly flips the family faith album in the verses of chapter 11 we skipped today. “Faithfulness shines both in suffering and in triumph, both in sorrow and in joy.”⁴ “Do you see?” the Preacher says to us, “Faith endures. Faith trusts God’s promises even when the present calls those promises into question. In the face of suffering, faith holds on and holds out because of the certainty of a future in which God has something better in store. Such are the lessons from our family photo album.”⁵ They are our ancestors and we are not alone.

Here’s another snapshot from our family album. You may not have met him but Paul Gerlach worshiped here at Haven on August 15. I ended my sermon that day by asking those present to write what they loved about God and to bring it back the next week. He actually mailed me his response. It reads:

“The most important thing is that:

For God so loved Paul Gerlach that he gave his one and only Son that Paul

Gerlach who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (A personalized John 3:10

I know where I'll be after I die. What great joy to look forward to!

God has given me a wonderful Christian wife and three great children. Lisa is severely mentally retarded. She loves Jesus and "daddy". She lives in a Christian group home not far from us. Our son, Jonathan, a civil engineer, is engaged to be married in October. Julie, our youngest, has some major learning disabilities and is unable to get a job.

I am 74 years old, a retired Lutheran elementary school teacher and principal. I have diabetes, had four heart attacks, have a pacemaker/defibrillator, am on dialysis, and am a double leg amputee. Through it all I say, "God IS GOOD all the time! God IS GOOD!"

It is a good God who keeps me alive with all of the medical technology He has given us.

Our Good God has given me six wonderful doctors.

God is good to have given me 95 days of strengthening while in rehab.

God has given me a wonderful Physical Therapist for home therapy to learn to walk with two prosthetic legs.

I could go on for hours telling how good God is, and especially to me.

God IS GOOD all the time!
All the time, God IS GOOD!

A Christian friend, Paul Gerlach."

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." What I hear Mr. Gerlach and the Hebrews Preacher saying was put this way by Thomas Long:

"Inwardly, people of faith have a confidence today, here and now when all hell is breaking loose around us, that the promises of God for peace, justice, mercy, and salvation can be trusted."⁶ And that inward confidence in God's promises becomes manifested in living that, boldly or quietly, advances those promises by comforting those who mourn, serving those who weep, working to ease the pain of those who are wounded.⁷

We are a people and a community of faith. We believe, as Frances Gench writes, "that the world and its human community are destined by God for redemption and that even now all of history moves steadily toward that day when Christ will come again, and

God's reign will be established in fullness." That is what we pray for each week, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We do not live without hope when the world seems to be spinning out of control or our world is rocked by illness, a difficult teacher, a broken relationship or death of a loved one. We may lose energy or focus or joy for a season of trials but we don't lose hope. We put one foot in front of the other, holding on to God's promises even as we may be having words with God. We remember, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

We continue the race called life, trying to run in the footsteps of Jesus, the pioneer, who has gone before us. If we listen, we will hear those ancestors, the great cloud of witnesses urging us on. You know their names, those who taught you about faith whose pictures are in the album with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Peter, Mary Magdalene. *(Invite names of others)* But above the voices of saints and the voices that would tempt us to give up, there is Jesus, our team captain who has already endured and finished the race . . . Jesus who simultaneously cheers us on from that finishing line and runs beside us ready to carry us when we falter . . . "Jesus who fills in and fills out what is lacking in our faithfulness to bring us into God's future."⁸ Whatever is happening, whatever is wearing on your soul, whatever is undermining the mission of the church, let's not lose heart, let's not let go of "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Hold on to faith. Hold on to Jesus who has hold of us. Keep feasting on God's Word, Meal and community so together we may keep the faith and keep moving toward God's gracious, whole, joyful future. That is our faith. That is our calling. That is who you and I are. And, oh, how the world needs us to be those people of faith, who have hope and who have the conviction to use our lives for God's saving work. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 9/5/15

ENDNOTES

1. Frances Taylor Gench, Hebrews and James Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 p. 63

2. Frances Taylor Gench, Hebrews and James Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 p. 63

3. partial quote and part paraphrase from Bryan J. Whitfield, "Commentary on Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org

4. Craddock, New Interpreters' Bible as quoted by Bryan J. Whitfield, "Commentary on Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org

5. Bryan J. Whitfield, "Commentary on Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org

6. Thomas G. Long Interpretation: Hebrews Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997 p 113

7. Thomas G. Long Interpretation: Hebrews Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997 p 113, 114

8. Bryan J. Whitfield, "Commentary on Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org