

Hebrews 11:1-16 – August 11, 2019

*“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* In my opinion, this might be one of the most beautifully phrased verses not just in the Bible, but in any book ever written. The writer of Hebrews takes a concept that defies all reason and logic. Something that philosophers have spent centuries debating and contemplating and analyzing. And he boils it down to one perfect sentence. *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*

It's the type of sentence that should make preaching on the subject of faith this week a no-brainer. After all, we've got a beautifully written definition sitting right in front of us. And yet, surprisingly, when I was seminary I actually had a professor who told us, in no uncertain terms, “Do not preach about faith.” Which was shocking to us at the time. And probably more than a little surprising to all of you as well.

And yet, he had good reason for it. And I was reminded of that fact as I read our Epistle lesson for today. Hebrews chapter 11 is a Who's Who of Biblical heroes. Men extolled with the highest praise for their incredible acts of faith. Abel offering the acceptable sacrifice. Enoch translated into heaven. Noah building the ark. Abraham traveling to the promised land and building the foundation for a great nation.

And he goes on from there, past verse 16, to list off even more names. Isaac and Jacob blessing their sons. Joseph rescuing his family. Moses leading the Israelites. Rahab hiding the spies. Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel. An incredible list.

And yet, if you look past their heroic accomplishments, you also see some deeply flawed people. Noah and his drunkenness. Abraham scoffing at the promise of a son. Isaac trying to sell his wife to Pharaoh. Jacob cheating his brother and uncle. Joseph and his arrogant pride. Moses refusing to following God's command. Rahab... a prostitute.

And then of course, the list of judges, who had *“the faith to conquer kingdoms and administer justice.”* And yet Gideon set up an idol to himself. Barak cowardly refused to fight the Ammonites. Samson was a womanizer. Jephthah made a foolish vow that resulted in his own daughter's death. David murdered a man out of lust for his wife.

Idealize these men, and they're superhuman figures. But look at them with a more critical eye and they're really no better than you or I. Which should worry us.

Because if Moses can see the miracles God performed against Egypt and yet doubt God's power to bring water from a rock at a command, then what hope is there for us? If Gideon can see God hand him victory over thousands with just 300 men and yet fall into idolatry, then what hope is there for me as your pastor? If David is the very man after God's own heart and yet he himself is overwhelmed by temptation, fear, and deceit, what hope is there for the Church?

If we look at these men and look at their heroism as a product of the great faith that they gathered up within themselves, then we have a rather tragic situation on our hands. Because for all that they were commended for their faith, they were still flawed, sinful human beings, condemned to death and the grave.

And that is exactly why you never preach about faith. Because we, as human beings are really, really horrible at having faith. It is far easier for us to find assurance in things of this world, rather than the things of God. It is far easier for us to doubt than it is for us to have hope. It is far easier for us to find certainty in what we can see than in what we can't see.

And if our salvation depended upon the strength of our faith, then, quite frankly, we would all be doomed to hell. So a sermon about why you just need to have a little more faith is really a sermon about despair and failure. Because, sometimes, you just don't have anymore faith in you. Sometimes, you're as faithless as the men and women listed in Hebrews 16.

And yet, each of these men and women were commended. Each of them was rewarded. Rewarded for this feeble faith that more often led to sin and failure than it did to great acts of heroism. God is not ashamed to be called their God. And God is not ashamed to be called our God. Why?

Let me put it to you this way. Years ago, back in seminary, I bought a car. It was a 2006 Toyota Corolla. And it was really kind of the first car I ever went out and bought completely on my own. And I loved that car.

I owned that car for close to 10 years. I put over 100,000 miles on it. And I never had a single part fail in that car. I never had to take it into the shop for any mechanical failure. Oil changes. New tires. New brakes. A little body work after we hit a deer.

But that's it. Day after day, week after week, mile after mile, that car started and ran without failure. And, in fact, it's still running. A few years ago, I gave that car to my mom and she's still driving it.

I think that's pretty good. I think that's pretty reliable. I would venture to say that I had faith in that car to get me where I needed to go. Now, by saying I had faith in it, how much am I saying about myself and how much am I saying about that car? Is saying I had faith in that car praising my ability to have faith or is it praising the car's ability to be worthy of that faith?

Those men in our Epistle reading were considered men of great faith. But is their faith a testament to their own willpower and determination, or is it a testament to the God whom they trusted for everything? Trusted not because of what they had done but because of what he had done. And what they trusted him to do long into the future.

They saw what God had fulfilled in their lives and so they trusted in the promise of Jesus Christ. We have seen the promise of Jesus Christ fulfilled and so we trust in God to work in our lives. Together, we are all made perfect, because God is worthy of our faith and trust.

So yes, Moses led the people out of Egypt. Yes, he refused to call water from the rock. But in success or failure, God didn't change. God was still reliable. God was still with Moses. And so after all his doubt and sinfulness, Moses still had faith in God. Not because of the greatness of his faith, but because of the greatness of his God.

And that is true of every person in this list and every person in this room. Myself included. I am not a perfect man, nor am I a perfect pastor. I have flown by the seat of my pants through sermons and Bible studies, quarrels and budget shortfalls. I have made mistakes. I have missed opportunities. I have offended people. And I have done less than I knew I was capable.

I am not a great hero of faith. And yet, after it all. After all the doubt and despair. After all the sin and failure. God is still there. The Father is still providing for our needs. The Son is still accepting us in love. The Spirit is still forgiving and sanctifying us each and every day.

And that great cloud of witnesses is still looking back at us through God's Word. Showing us what it means to be sure of things hoped for and confident of things unseen. Not by how perfectly they did it. But by how perfectly God did it. How He validated the things they hoped for, how He proved worthy of their confidence in things unseen.

As a pastor you don't ever preach about faith. No, you preach about the God who gives us faith. Who fulfilled the promises he made to Abel, Enoch, and Noah. To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To all the people of great faith though out the Bible. To all the people, like us, who know they needed a savior and find him in Jesus Christ. Amen.