

Topic: Faith that Perseveres

Subtopic: Faith requires a readiness for action, for faith is measured not by feelings but by the movement of your feet.

The words, “By faith... by faith... by faith,” pulse through today’s epistle like a heartbeat.”¹ The author begins by telling us what faith is. He states, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*”² By defining faith as “assurance” and “conviction,” the author indicates that biblical faith is not a vague hope grounded in imaginary, wishful thinking. Instead, faith is a settled confidence that something in the future—something that is not yet seen but has been promised by God—will actually come to pass because God will bring it about. Such faith in the unseen realities of God is emphasized throughout this chapter and the entire book. This assurance is demonstrated by action because the author catalogs a list of Biblical characters who “*through faith conquered kingdom, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.*”³ But it is not all so rosey. “*Some were tortured, refusing to accept release. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even changes and imprisonment.*”⁴ Through their lives and the sacrifices they made, we see what faith looks like. For example, when Abraham was called “*to go out to a place he was to receive as an inheritance, he obeyed and went.*”⁵ Abraham’s actions demonstrated the reality of his faith, and it was by such faith that he found approval.

¹ Rev. Dr. Amy Richter in Sermons that Work, 2019

² Hebrews 11:1

³ Hebrews 11:33-34

⁴ Hebrews 11:35-36

⁵ Hebrews 11:8b

Looking closely at Abraham's life, you will find that he didn't always have such faith. When the realities of life pressed in upon him, he sought God and discovered that God was faithful.

I have often been in a place that feels dark, empty, and scary. That is why I am so grateful for saints like Thomas, who was not afraid to admit his doubt; or like the father of the epileptic, who asked Jesus to heal his son, saying, "***I believe, help my unbelief.***"⁶ Such people make me feel like it is okay to question. It is okay to struggle with faith questions as long as you are open to growing, learning, and using what little faith we have.

We don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. But we can tell from reading the whole letter and hearing its concerns that it's written to people who were about to give up due to the trials, tribulations, and persecutions they were experiencing. This tendency tells me that holding tightly to the hope we profess is difficult. Therefore, when I wonder if God is real and want to know why I can't see or feel God, I think of the story of the disciples in the boat when suddenly a terrible storm arose. All the while, Jesus is lying there asleep. Finally, in desperation, they woke Jesus and said, "***Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?***"⁷ That question was loaded with emotion. The reality of life-threatening danger surrounded them. They couldn't help but have some level of sincere doubt and accusation.

They may have been thinking, "We followed you. We trusted you. So, why are you asleep? Don't you care?" Such feelings are raw and honest. But they don't define who Jesus is. Despite their feelings, Jesus was still in the boat with them. In such times, their faith was measured not by their emotions but by

⁶ Mark 9:24 and Matthew 17:15

⁷ Mark 4:38

what they did with their feet. Then with the little bit of faith they had, they came to Jesus asking for help.⁸

Feelings change. They can change like the rolling of waves on a storm-tossed sea. In these uncertain times, the words from our Gospel today ring with prophetic clarity, ***“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”***⁹ Fear can cause a person to withdraw from danger to avoid harm. It is one of the most common human emotions we possess. It is addressed over and over in both the Old and New Testament because people of faith in every generation have faced overwhelming challenges. So the preacher’s message in the book of Hebrews is, ***“Don’t give up. Hold fast the confession of your faith without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”***¹⁰

Mother Teresa gave us an example of such steadfast faith. She believed that God could be found by getting in touch with people, by meeting them where they lived. Therefore, she said, ***“love and faith go together. They complete each other.”***¹¹ Because she continued to turn to God amidst the stifling hopelessness she saw every day, her love and faith endured.

Sarah Morris, the rector of Trinity Church in Mount Airy, NC, said, “It is when I am helping others that my faith feels the strongest. It is when I witness others or tend to the needs of others that my faith grows.”¹²

This past week I met a lifeguard who was here on a work visa from Poland. Her family, and the families of almost everyone she knew in Poland, have taken in refugees from Ukraine. Yet, amid all of the devastation, it was as if God was in their midst, saying to those hurting people, “I’ve got you, hang

⁸ Matthew 8:25 “And they went and woke him saying, ‘Save us Lord.’”

⁹ Luke 12:32

¹⁰ Hebrews 10:23

¹¹ Brian Kolodiejchuk’s book “Mother Teresa—Where there is Love, There is God” published in 2010

¹² The Rev. Sarah Morris, Meditation on Faith given at Cursillo, 2022

on, because there are many who serve as my hands and feet in this world.”

There is no slam dunk argument for faith. On this side of heaven, faith has its evidence, but we must do our part to connect the dots. That is why we need a far-looking faith. Philip Brooks wrote, “*You may not see all the way between, but keep your eyes forward still.*”¹³ We need the hope that a Biblical interpretation of the future inspires. Our intellect can only take us so far; our hearts must do the rest. Paul tells us in Romans that “*with the heart, one believes and is justified, and with the mouth, one confesses and is saved.*”¹⁴

At the campground we stayed at, there is a waterpark. One of the pools has an intermediate slide for kids. My grandson, Sawyer, who is four years old, wasn’t sure he could handle the 12-foot drop on his own, so he asked me to be at the bottom of the slide ready, with hands held out to catch him. Once he took the leap of faith to jump on the slide, he found that he could rely on me to be there at the bottom to grab him. That experience gave him confidence and the desire to do it over and over again.

Similarly, confidence grows as we act on God’s integrity. And once we learn that he is faithful, then we want to trust him repeatedly to do the same.

God’s kingdom works in much the same way. We can only become people of faith when we become people whose actions demonstrate trust in our heavenly Father’s reliability. Then, when we experience his faithfulness, it produces in us a longing to trust him through efforts that put feet to our faith. It helps us to “*Be dressed for action and keep your lamps burning*”¹⁵ as we await our master’s return, for such faith works through love, despite what we may feel.

¹³ Phillips Brooks, Quotes about Faith, Quotefancy.com

¹⁴ Romans 10:10

¹⁵ Luke 12:35