

August 7, 2022

FPBC Retreat Center

Faith Begins, Endures, Matures Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16

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(RE-INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS)

Anyone remember their New Years resolution from 8 months ago? I don't, BUT because Pastor Mike's been following the lectionary and won't hold over the sermon he had planned for today; I got reminded of my resolution, not from 2022, but from 2017! If you were around then, you helped me prove that it IS possible to keep a New Year's resolution. My resolution back on January first 2017 was to study and preach my assigned weeks, from the Book of Hebrews. Proves that if you set an attainable goal and plan it out, and have helpers and witnesses, you are more likely to reach it.

Also highlights the power of a little flash drive that I put all my sermons and other files on when I vacated my old office's computer. I pulled this scripture's reflection out on Thursday when Pastor Mike and I agreed that it would be better for him to not try to be here today. He and his wife have the kind of Covid that is simply exhausting.

So, a refresher about the book Hebrews. It was probably not a letter like a lot of the other books of the New Testament, but rather more of a sermon - a transcript or manuscript, sent to a young Christian community that was discouraged. It reads like a sermon, and these final chapters, 11 and 12, begin the last point, leading to its benediction in 13:25.

(FAITH BEGINS)

In the pre-planned order of service, for after the sermon, Pastor Mike had selected a hymn new to me, so probably to most of us. I decided to take my 2017 Hebrews 11 sermon and re-shape it by using this very lovely hymn. Faith Begins...

Text by Carl P Dew Jr. 1995

Music by Charles F. Gounod 1872

We and/or Daniel will sing it in a few minutes. Here's the first verse:

Faith begins by letting go,
giving up what had seemed sure,
taking risks and pressing on,
though the way feels less secure:
pilgrimage both right and odd,
trusting all our life to God.

Chapter 11, begins with its definition of faith. Saying faith is 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'

Professional theologians quite rightly point out that this statement is incomplete. Faith, as a concept, is large, round, and complex, a thing of always MORE. The author -preacher's description is only one scoop out of the carton of ice cream that we call faith. But the Preacher is not writing an all inclusive theological resource. He is preaching a sermon, and he crafts a working definition of faith that will serve his immediate goals.

In other words, you would not want your preacher to fully explain in depth every theological concept every time in every sermon. Well, a few of you might like that, I can name who. Most would not. So as a good sermon would, Hebrews, especially here, is pushing hard to make the point as simply as possible. Faith is what we believe God can do without requiring proof that God will do it. It's almost impossible to define and describe faith, anyway. It's one of those that you can know and feel more than you can explain.

And the preacher to the Hebrews preaches it! My seminary preaching professor made a big deal that we should use a lot of scripture references when we preach, to support our points. The writer of Hebrews had the same kind of professor. Besides what Sue read about Sarah and Abraham, almost every one of the Old Testament stories that we learn to teach us about God and a life of faith, are included later in the Hebrews 11 list of examples. All the main ones, the patriarchs are all there, even some of the important women.

Some of those mentioned definitely are not in our Children's Story Bibles. Many of you know these stories of faith from the Old Testament, but probably not all of them. It's supposed to be hot and maybe stormy later today. Get a concordance and an easy to read translation of the Bible that includes the Old Testament and look up some of these "by faith" accounts that you don't know.

I especially like the hymn's phrase that a life of faith is a pilgrimage both "right and odd". Ponder the words of Hebrews 11 about actions taken in faith, deeds done that might not make sense, except that it seemed God-directed. These people did what they did because God spoke to them directly, or indirectly. And they acted in faith. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (11:1). What are you feeling convicted about? Faith prompts new **beginnings**? Maybe God wants you to spend more time in study or service or fellowship. There are all sorts of ways around Battle Creek to do those. Maybe you need a retreat, a brief pilgrimage- talk to Sue Keitel! Faith is a pilgrimage, right AND odd. 😊

(MEMORIES HELP)

Here's the second verse:

Faith endures by holding on,
 keeping mem'ry's roots alive
 so that hope may bear its fruit;
 promise-fed, our souls will thrive,
 not through merit we possess
 but by God's great faithfulness.

Memories of the **enduring** kind of faith that our fathers and mothers, our grandparents, or others, had, help our faith endure. We remember the faithfulness of God throughout all generations. That's the story of Hebrews 11- Memories "of enduring faith".

My mom used to tell her story about the time as a young woman in 1944 that she took her chubby toddler son, my oldest brother, on a bus from Kalamazoo to Tallahassee Florida, to see her husband at his army base, before he was deployed to the European Theater, she didn't know he was headed to Normany.

They rode more than a thousand miles, by bus. The boy child, who weighed in at 10 pounds at birth, was a handful for my mom. She was about my size; he was a big toddler! The story includes that the frustrated little guy threw and broke his last bottle, because they were glass in 1944. Consequently- no more bottles for Jimmy!

And of course there also were only cloth diapers to deal with in those days, too. My mom also dealt with her constant motion sickness and my brother's toddler curiosity- his new found ability to run, run down the aisles of the bus. Mom always was grateful for those others on the bus who helped her manage.

What did I learn from that family story? That a woman with faith and a plan, guided by love, can do just about anything she sets her mind to. I am here today, at least in part because that young mom, later on, taught me that God would help manage any difficult journey. By Faith.

The memory is strong today of the worship and picnic here 10 years ago this weekend, when I knew I had ovarian cancer and had no idea what my future would be. Not by my merit but by God's faithfulness, I am well. No way to explain "why me" and not any of the others you've lost to cancer.

So we also notice that there are verses of Hebrews 11, like verse 12-13, that talk about the previous, but also the future generations, Abraham's offspring includes our generations! This isn't only about those from 3000 years ago. When I think about the people I know that are Christ-followers, this is what I think. Just like the Old Testament

people mentioned in Hebrews 11, our generation is too, that “all of these people continued living with faith until they died”.

There are people today that do amazing things, because they are led by God. There are people under this canopy that make it through each day because they have faith. Their faith, your faith, causes you to do the things listed in the hymn’s third verse:

Faith matures by reaching out,
stretching minds, enlarging hearts,
sharing struggles, living prayer,
binding up the broken parts;
till we find the commonplace
ripe with witness to God’s grace.

This verse calls us to community. Faith thrives in community, which could be why my faith is a little weaker than it was- I am just beginning to find a faith community after my meaningful years with the First Pres community of faith.

And chapter 11, verse 39 that Sue didn’t read, talks about **you** and your generation and all people of faith before you: “they were commended for their faith”. Are the stories people remember and tell about you going to be ones that commend you for your faith? Do they point toward an honest, faithful life of trusting God? Will they know you’re a Christian, by your love? Is your faith a witness to God’s grace? A tall order, I know.

Don’t get this confused! Being a good person isn’t the point. Honoring God, not making God ashamed. Living a life that pleases God *and* makes our world better, not worse. That’s the goal for all who follow in the way of righteousness. By grace you are saved through faith. By faith we “witness to God’s grace”.

Consider your faith journey and that of someone else, ***a mature person of faith***. Share stories with a person who inspires you to live by faith. If they have already gone to God, share their story with someone who loved them, with a call or note. Commend them, just as God did: “well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt 23:25). That’s the verse the sons with plenty to praise their fathers ask for when arranging their funeral services.

I know stories and examples that are hard to forget, that go the other way, too. At times I am startled by typically good people who enjoy “beating the system” somehow, or whose main goal in life is making money. Most of the time when I am preparing for funerals families love to share tribute stories. But sometimes adult children sit with lips tight and arms crossed and are not able to find any way to honestly eulogize their dead parent.

Sure. We all make mistakes. We frequently find ourselves in circumstances where we compound the negative. We can try to turn things around, and redeem the situation. When we've built walls it becomes hard to take them down neatly and carefully and gently. So we are constantly "having to have faith". And depend on grace.

You really do live in a world of free choice. Yes, lots of things happen that are out of your control, but there are things that we can choose. Choose to be someone who lives by faith, "ripe with witness to God's grace".

Amen