

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
September 1, 2019
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16 Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.

2 For by it our ancestors won God's approval.

3 By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

4 By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts, and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith.

5 By faith Enoch was taken away, and so he did not experience death. He was not to be found because God took him away. For before he was taken away, he was approved as one who pleased God. **6** Now without faith it is impossible to please God, since the one who draws near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

7 By faith Noah, after he was warned about what was not yet seen and motivated by godly fear, built an ark to deliver his family. By faith he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed and set out for a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out, even though he did not know where he was going. **9** By faith he stayed as a foreigner in the land of promise, living in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, coheirs of the same promise. **10** For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11 By faith even Sarah herself, when she was unable to have children, received power to conceive offspring, even though she was past the age, since she considered that the one who had promised was faithful. **12** Therefore, from one man—in fact, from one as good as dead—came offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky and as innumerable as the grains of sand along the seashore.

13 These all died in faith, although they had not received the things that were promised. But they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth. **14** Now those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. **15** If they were thinking about where they came from, they would have had an opportunity to return. **16** But they now desire a better place—a heavenly one.

Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

“Faith Fueled by Promise”

Walking through the Hall of Fame is impressive. Staring at the portraits and bronze busts of famous people leaves you with a sense of awe. Reading the little plaques and digging into their biographies makes you realize what a tiny fraction of the population have ever or will ever be able to accomplish what they achieved in their lives. So often when we recognize the best, we imagine a huge gulf between them and us. They are so much better; born with amazing gifts, and blessed with unique opportunities to become successful and famous and wealthy.

Hebrews chapter 11 takes us along on a walk through the impressive lives of people of faith. It's problematic when we apply the same attitude toward these people in the Bible as we do to recognized entertainers. It's a problem, because putting them on a pedestal beyond our reach and superior to us is the exact opposite of the purpose behind this chapter in the Bible. In this chapter God is the real hero. The well-known, but flawed people lived ordinary lives of faith. Through the power of God's promises they did some extraordinary things. Because they had a reliable God standing behind his promises, they were able to live confidently and courageously. The same is true for God's people today. Faith fuels us at the core of our being. Faith stretches us to live in joyful appreciation/understanding of God's ultimate purposes for us.

First, we need to understand the proper role of faith in the life of a Christian. Hebrews 11:1 is less of a definition of what faith is than a description of what it looks like, what it does. Faith is God at work inside you. I switched the translation in the bulletin to more accurately reflect the original here: "**Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.**" (CSB) Faith is grounded in something real. Faith isn't so much about what I think or how I feel, as faith is God propelling me forward. God gives the life of a believer a forward focus because faith is based on something real and reliable. This is important, because so often we think of faith as some quality we possess. Maybe it's like a muscle that allows me to do great things or falls short of delivering what I want when I'm weak. Maybe it's more like a battery that is fully charged to give power for living the way God wants and gets run down and makes me susceptible to temptation.

That's not entirely wrong. But it is much better to think of faith as your connection to your God. It is knowing who he is and what he's done. It's acceptance of his Word as an authority for your life. It's confidence that what he gives you life and eternal life. Faith as your connection to God becomes a way of life for a believer who relies completely on the promises of God. Faith causes us to live confidently because of God's reliability. Faith is fueled by God's promises.

Here's why that distinction is important. This book of the Bible was written to a group of believers who were struggling. They had become Christians. But then things didn't turn out the way they expected. Things in their lives were getting worse instead of better. They were suffering instead of celebrating. And those personal troubles were causing them to doubt whether Christianity was really right for them. They were tempted to give up on the faith that had been given and entrusted to them.

That's life. Life is hard. Homework is hard. Writing research papers on two hours of sleep is hard. Going to work when everyone else gets a long weekend is hard. Taking care of family members is hard. Stress can cause us to react negatively. Tragedies and setbacks mess with our minds. But when it comes to the Christian life and things get hard, do we look to ourselves or the real and reliable basis for our faith? When marriage gets rough, we slide back into become more selfish, focusing on what we need from that relationship. When work isn't so rewarding, we forget about the people depending on us, the people we could be serving. When we get wrapped up in family crises, we let ourselves get overwhelmed. We let personal troubles excuse faithless behaviors. We let disappointments in life cause us

to drift away from God's Word. We aren't worthy of being heroes of faith. We don't see it inside. So we allow doubts about our faith to turn our backs on the true hero for our lives.

One behavioral psychologist describes how we typically go about making positive changes in our lives the wrong way. He says we get too focused on the outcomes we want. I want to lose 20 pounds. I want to finish my degree. I want to get that promotion. Now, he says it's good to have goals. They provide a road map for where we want to go. But it's even better to focus on habits that will allow us to get there. And if we really want to change habits, we will start with identity. If you focus on who you want to become, the habits will follow and then the results will fall into place. He says when someone offers you a cigarette, you can say, 'I'm trying to quit smoking.' That's a habit. But if you say, 'No thanks, I'm not a smoker.' That's identity.

This chapter of Hebrews was written to encourage Christians who were experiencing setbacks in the faith. It was written so they would endure and persevere when things seemed hopeless for those new Christians. But God isn't just concerned with behaviors. Yes, he wants positive habits for people of faith. Hebrews takes that one step farther back. To get those outcomes of faith, start with your identity. Start with who you are in Christ. Before the author of these verses gives examples of believers living by faith, he starts it off: **"By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God."** (Hebrews 11:3) Here "we" includes the ancients from the OT, the group struggling in the first generation after the ascension of Jesus, and people who have work to do in their lives today.

Focus on identity changes habits. Since God's Word is an invisible power that produces visible results, God's people live by the Word of God. Life for a child of God means hoped based on the reliable promises of a trustworthy God. Hebrews uses the example of Abraham. He didn't know where he was going, but he went where God told him to go. Abraham responded to an uncertain future with confidence in God's word. Then Hebrews tells us how Abraham and Sarah were able to have a child when they were both well beyond the physical ability to have a baby. Faith didn't change their anatomy. God's word could do what Abraham's own body could never do on its own no matter how much Abraham flexed his faith muscle or charged his faith battery. Abraham lived on the basis of God's promise. And God showed himself to be utterly reliable, faithful to his promises.

Life was definitely hard for people of faith throughout the ages. Hebrews tells us that God's people in the Old Testament actually had a disadvantage compared to people of faith now: **"These all died in faith, although they had not received the things that were promised. But they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth."** (Hebrews 11:13 CSB) By faith they saw what God would give them in the future. For them believing God's promise was seeing. They continued to look forward to the fulfillment of these promises God had made to them.

But it was more challenging for them, because they never had a home. This concept of a homeland takes a little bit of explaining. We can move to a new city to go to school or transfer to a new state for a job opportunity. After a few years go by, we can consider it our

home. But it's not the same as having a homeland. That's where your people come from. Your heritage and status and privilege are all tied to a place. In ancient times, to live as a foreigner or temporary resident meant no security. It meant dependence on your hosts for hospitality. Cities, at least the best cities, could provide opportunities. But ultimate security was traced back to links with their original homeland and the possibility of return.

For God's people of faith, homeland wasn't just a spot on a map or patch of dirt. God's people **"desire a better place — a heavenly one."** (Hebrews 11:16 CSB) What those people in Abraham's time and throughout the Old Testament never God to see was the ultimate fulfillment of the promise. Those promises became reality in the life and ministry of Jesus. When he faced the most agonizing suffering, Jesus acknowledged: **"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."** (John 12:27 NIV 1984) Jesus faced the most extreme hardships without wavering in faith. Jesus never look into his own heart to be guided by what he felt or what would make him happiest. Jesus never drifted away from his determination to go to the cross. The faithlessness of the people mocking him, the faithlessness of people in the centuries before his birth, the faithlessness of people in the future didn't cause him to come down from that cross.

And because Jesus was heroic in his crucifixion to pay the sins of the world, he gives us real reasons to trust in him. Jesus says to disciples of all ages: **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."** (John 14:1 NIV) When you feel overwhelmed or under attack, Jesus say: **"I have told you these things, so that in me you have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."** (John 14:33 NIV) Jesus gives us confidence for life through his defeat of death. Now he promises: **"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."** (John 14:2,3 NIV) You have a homeland. Jesus secured it for you by his resurrection. You have a place that is yours, with your people, the people of faith, gifted to you by your Savior.

Hebrews chapter 11 is less of a faith Hall of Fame than it is a stadium filled with cheering spectators. Hebrews 11 shows you that you aren't alone as you go through struggles in life. You have a community of believers who have gone through something very similar to you. They aren't heroes. But they know the hero is Jesus. They weren't born with special pedigree or power. But they lived confident in the power of God's promises. They weren't elite performers or amazing people. But they were powered by the utter reliability of their God. You and I are part of that crowd of people of faith. We too are fueled by faith in God's promises. Amen.