Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Scripture Introduction

The following Scripture is the beginning of a famous passage from Hebrews. What follows this reading is a long list of those who lived by their own imperfect faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel, and the prophets. All of them walked by faith.

Scripture Reading

Hebrews 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

* * *

As I did last night, I want to thank you, this year’s confirmation class, for what you have put into this process: your energy, your willingness, your showing up, your questions. Thank you.

So, after nine weeks of this process, now what?

In a few moments you’ll be invited to affirm your faith. We will ask you, “Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Do you intend to be his disciple, to obey his word and show his love? Will you be a faithful member of this congregation?”

And the answer to each question is “Yes.” And, just like the time we spent in my study, this isn’t a quiz. It’s building a relationship. It’s a step in your relationship with God. Of course, this “Yes” does not answer all the questions. It doesn’t solve all the riddles. It doesn’t mean that you and we together won’t still wonder about a lot of things.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.
Now What?

What it does mean is that you have consciously joined us in this journey of faith. Your “Yes” says, “I’m going to walk with this community into the future.” It means that you join the rest of us in trying to walk the way that Sarah, Abraham, Miriam, Moses, Mary, and Paul walked—by faith. Your “Yes” joins you to us but also to a thousand generations who have walked by faith.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Now what? It’s not that suddenly you see the whole staircase. We walk by faith toward the unseen. It’s the way God’s people have always walked. When Mary Magdalene was your age, she didn’t see any further than you do. When Abraham was my age, he didn’t see all the way up the whole staircase. They each took the step in front of them, and that’s how we will walk too.

As the writer to the Hebrews says, “Faith is the conviction of things not seen.” Now what? To the list of those who walk by faith, to the list of Abraham, Rahab, Abel, Enoch, Miriam, and Moses, will be added: Amelia, Karl, Michael, Annie, Peter, and Abby... All of you, who, like your ancient forebears, walk by faith.

Among those things not seen in which we nevertheless trust at the foundation of the gospel and toward which we walk is the Kingdom of Heaven.

We started the service with what Revelation says about that day and that place:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, [and there and then] God will be with them; and will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...

That’s one of the things not seen, in which we trust: the Kingdom of Heaven. It’s a place, a day, of perfect justice: no crying or pain. No death. It’s a place of perfect beauty and perfect love. And it is unseen—just like a lot of the staircase between here and there. It is unseen: this Kingdom of Heaven, this Day of the Lord. This “there and then.”

So, if it’s unseen, couldn’t it all just be made up? That question never quite goes away. Abraham asked it. Sarah laughed the first time God made her a promise. Moses had forty years of wondering if it was all made up. Right? By exactly that kind of faith—not knowing whether it was all made up, not seeing, our ancestors received approval.

I still love and still turn to C.S. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia. The stories are illuminating Christian allegories, and the central story, for those of you who don't know, is of a Christ figure: Aslan the lion, the true Lord of Narnia.

In the first book, four children, who are the heroines and heroes of the story, stumble through the back of a wardrobe and into the kingdom of Narnia. When they arrive, Narnia is caught in the clutches of the White Witch. The Witch makes herself out to be queen of Narnia, and by her evil powers she has made everything snowy and cold for 100 years, so that it is “always winter and never Christmas.” And the White Witch has convinced almost all of Narnia that Aslan is powerless or is far away and never coming back.

But a few in Narnia believe another promise. The appearance of the children in Narnia has been foretold to the creatures that live there—and some steadfastly believe the promise about the children and Aslan. The children have been prophesied to be kings and queens themselves, intended eventually to meet up with Aslan, the true Lord of Narnia, the great lion, and to join with him to defeat the White Witch. That’s the basic story.
In one of the later books, *The Silver Chair*, the deception of the enemy is even more profound—in this story the Queen’s deception is that there simply is no Narnia and no Aslan. It’s all made up. Two children, Jill and Eustace, are sent by Aslan to the Underworld to rescue Prince Rilian so that he may come into his own as Ruler of Overland. On their rescue mission Jill and Eustace make a friend, Puddlegump—and the three together attempt to save Prince Rilian, who has been charmed into servitude to the Queen of the Underworld.

They are able to release Rilian, but on their return they’re intercepted by the Queen. She uses her charms and enchanting spells to convince all four (Jill, Eustace, Rilian, and Puddlegump) that there really is only the Underworld, that there is no sun, no Aslan, no Narnia, no Overland at all, except in their dreams—like John’s in Revelation. Then Puddlegump, in a brave and painful act, stamps out with his bare feet the fire that’s creating all the Queen’s enchanting smokes. Gritting his teeth and standing courageously before her, he confronts the Queen. In one of the finer speeches in all of C.S. Lewis’s work, he addresses the Queen with this conviction:

“Ma’am, one word. I suppose all you’ve been saying is right. I always like to know the worst and put the best face on it I can. So I won’t deny any of what you’ve said. But there’s one more thing to be said, even so. Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this nasty pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that’s a funny thing, when you come to think of it. If you’re right, we’re just babies making up a game. But four babies playing a game can make a play world that makes your real world hollow. That’s why I’m going to stand by the play world. I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t an Aslan to lead it. I’m going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn’t any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for our supper, if these two gentlemen and the young lady are ready, we’re leaving your court at once and setting out to spend our lives looking for Overland.”

Now what?
We’re going to spend our lives looking for Overland—like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Mary and Paul.

Overland—the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven, the promise of the Day of the Lord.

My friend Tom is pastor of a church in Kansas City. And I’ve known for a long time of his great love for his brother, Gene, who was born with mental disabilities. Tom says, Gene was born with “a generous heart but a limited mind.” He says:

[Gene] will never forget my birthday, but will never remember how to spell his own name. Gene has almost never called me by my name. I’m "bwuddah." He’s [close to fifty now], but could not pass the first grade. If I have prayed shamelessly in my life, it has been about Gene. As [Fred] Craddock would say, "I have stood at the door with bloody knuckles, waiting for the ‘good things.’”

We might say—he has walked by faith in the conviction of things unseen. Tom says:

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Now What?

Gene wants to drive a car. That's his goal in life. Usually it's a red car, sometimes a convertible. He wants to get his license, stop by the gas station to “fill 'er up,” buy a Coke with his own money, and drive his car.

Tom tells a constantly recurring conversation with his brother:

“Gene, where do you want to go in your car?”

“I'm gonna come see you....”

“That will be great, Gene.”

“I'll take you and we'll go see Daddy. Don't tell him I'm coming.”

“It's our secret Gene.”

Then, Tom says,

One day, while visiting Gene near his group home in Louisiana, we sat across from each other at Shoney's.... Gene had finished his [usual] litany regarding the car. Then, in a moment so unlike him it seemed surreal, Gene asked, “Do you think I'll ever drive a red car, bwuddah?” I said, “Yes. It won't be soon I don't guess, but someday you will drive.”

Then Tom says,

[Of course] he'll never drive. Certainly not my car. But it's not about driving. Not even for Gene. It's about everything that's gone wrong being set right. I should have said, “Someday you'll be able to connect with your brother and intelligence won't be a barrier... Someday you will be able to give the gift of your presence to your father.”

Somewhere, at the foundation of [the Gospel], is the promise that God will make life right. The kingdom of heaven will come. [Hatred and prejudice] will be swallowed up by people committed to living with rather than against each other. The hunger of children’s bellies will give way to the noise of table blessings. The work of violence will cease, and all God’s children will someday grow up to be neither the haters nor the hated....

That day hasn’t come yet....

But we trust that day belongs to God, and it will come. It is called the Day of the Lord. It is called the Kingdom of Heaven. And we make our way there toward Overland, toward that blessed day, toward the top of that whole staircase. And we walk there by faith and not by sight, just like Abraham and Sarah.

Now what?

Now, we join our ancestors in the journey of faith—in the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.

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Bob Dunham, in a sermon, Called to Be Stewards of Longing, delivered on October 27, 2013 at Chapel Hill, North Carolina—telling the story of our mutual friend Tom Are and Tom's brother, Gene.