

Proper 14
Hebrews 1:1-11

How many in the congregation have faith?

In what do you *have* faith?

How many in the congregation have doubt?

What is it that you doubt?

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.

In the context of writing poetry and matters of faith:

“...in matters of the heart, such as ... faith, there is no right or wrong way to do it, but only the way of your life. Just paying attention will teach you what bears fruit and what doesn't. But it will be necessary to revise--to doodle, scratch out, erase, even make a mess of things--in order to make it come out right.”

— Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*

Let me suggest to you that faith is not static; it must be dynamic. If we pay attention to it, as Kathleen Norris writes, it will ebb and flow, it will change based on situations, we'll experience a strong faith one day and wonder if there's a God the next day. When we need it most is when we often have difficulty sensing God's presence, when we question if there is even a God.

Other times, our faith, our assurance and conviction of the reality of God and God's promises, will get us through the most difficult times, and we will find the strength to deal with and move through disaster, personal loss, and the death of loved ones because we know we are not alone. As I was preparing for a funeral yesterday, I was thinking about the 23rd Psalm – especially the line about walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Cristy said to me, “How about when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we stop and smell the roses?” Even in the midst of tragedy, we find those who are able to smell the roses – they are even in this congregation. That is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen. That is the gift we are given by a loving God – comfort and hope even in the valley as we look toward the light on the other side.

When we talk about faith with others, we hear their concerns, their questions, their reasons for continuing to be faithful to their belief in the existence and presence of God. Being in conversation helps us to scratch out, to erase, to doodle, to revise, to re-examine our own understanding of our faith. There are very few people – if any – whose faith is 100%, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. We are human beings with brains that cause us to be rational, to reason, to turn to logic, to question the relationship between things we see and those that we cannot see; to ask the question “How can this be?”

The reading from Hebrews identifies some of the Hebrew patriarchs who depended on God as they wandered into the unknown – even through their own doubts. God promised Moses that Moses would lead his people to the Promised Land. He led them there, alright, but Moses himself only saw it from a mountain top before he died. But he believed that God did as God had promised. More recently, Martin Luther King Jr, in his last speech, said he would die happy because he seen the Promised Land – a land of complete justice – he had been to the mountain top. He knew that there would come a time when injustices against people of color would no long exist. He knew this; he believed this. And he was killed by a gunman the next day.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.

The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible reflects on this morning's passage in this way: In the past faith brought divine approval to the men who trusted God. In the present it enables us to understand that the things we see and touch are actually dependent on what is invisible to us. Faith is the encounter with God in which a taste of his goodness enables us to trust in him even without the evidence necessary to convince a skeptic. By faith we can understand life as God's gift and see the world about us as his creation.

All these people died without seeing the fulfillment of what was promised and thus might seem vulnerable to the reproach that faith was in vain. But they looked forward in hope to God's promise, rejecting the temptation to turn back.¹

Faith "enables us to trust in God even without the evidence necessary to convince a skeptic." We can share our faith but we do not have to defend it to someone who challenges us about whether God really exists. We do not have to prove faith. In fact, if we take verse in Hebrews 11 at its face value, we cannot prove our faith. Based on our own life experiences, faith is. It is personal in the sense that each one of us needs to struggle with and depend on it. It is corporate in that we become members of a community that believes similarly to us. In the case of this community, struggling with our faith and questioning our own beliefs are two of our norms. In other communities of faith, there is a different understanding of faith as something that is believed and taught from the pulpit or from the institution. There is less room for voicing doubt even though it might exist privately.

When I do funerals or memorial services, I am very aware of how many in the congregation may or may not be Christians. That knowledge will help me form a homily. I certainly will not shy away from our belief in God and in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, but I will frame the promises of God in a way that encourages listening and hearing the assurance of hope that is present even in the face of earthly death. When I do services for someone who has died in the faith and those in the congregation are mostly Christians, I will focus more on the beliefs of the one whose life we're celebrating and remind us all of the promises of a God who believes in each one of us.

Finally, I think we need to remind ourselves of the importance of perseverance in faith.

- When we pray, the answer might not always be the one we want but rather what we need; we need to believe that good will come of something to which the Spirit is leading us, even if we're unsure or don't like the direction.
- When things are going poorly for us, it's most important that we not think God is absent but rather that we must turn our faces to the God who is always present.
- We need to remember that God often speaks and works through others, which is why our faith community is important – to discuss our faith, our doubts, and even our certainties. We are here to accompany one another on our faith journeys rather than walking those journeys alone. When we do not take those opportunities, we are hurting ourselves and we are withholding our wisdom and experience from others. To not pay attention to our faith and spiritual journeys is to not be ready for that unexpected hour, as we heard this morning in the Gospel of Luke, because our hearts – our time, talents, and treasure -- are elsewhere.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.

This is central to our journey through life, it is what gives us constant and reliable strength and comfort, it is what guides us to the light during our lives and at the end of our lives.

Amen.

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¹ *Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971, p. 913