

By Faith

12/30/18

Hebrews 11:1-2 New Living Translation (NLT)

11 Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see. ² Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation.

Hebrews 12:1-2 New Living Translation (NLT)

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. ² We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.^[a]

I hope that you all had a wonderful time with family and friends this past week with Christmas gatherings and activities. Tomorrow is New Year's Eve and we can look forward to the new year. We will be starting a new sermon series next Sunday..."This Year I Will..." Today is what we call a one-off; we are in between the new series and the advent series. Sometimes these are harder to plan for. And as I was praying about what to share today, one verse kept popping into my mind...1 Corinthians 13:13. It says "And now these three remain, faith hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." During advent, we have talked about the hope, peace, joy, and love that Jesus brought to earth. So, hope and love are

covered from the 1 Corinthians 13 passage, so I thought I'd talk about faith. Love is definitely the greatest, but faith is in the top 3! It deserves some attention.

Our scripture this morning is all about faith. In fact the entire 11th chapter of Hebrews talks about faith. It describes the great witness of the faithful from Abel to Rahab. Each story of faith starts out with the phrase "by faith." In fact, I counted the phrase "by faith" 23 times in chapter 11. "By faith Abel...by faith Enoch...by faith Noah...by faith Abraham...by faith Isaac...by faith Jacob...by faith Joseph...by faith Moses... by faith Rahab..." The author of Hebrews wanted to encourage the people by sharing these faith stories. Just as the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt when things got tough, the recipients of this letter were being tempted to go back to Judaism and put their faith in Moses. How easy it is for us to go back to what is comfortable....the old adage "it is better to dance with the devil you know than the devil you don't know." They were fearful of the future, rather than relying on their faith. One of the key points in Hebrews is found in verse 13 "All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised but they saw it from a distance and welcomed it" and again in verse 39 "all these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised.

Let's just take a closer look at a few of those mentioned in Hebrews 11:

- Abraham – he was promised to be the father of many nations, yet he never saw this in his lifetime. It wasn't until he was up in years that he and his wife Sarah had their son Isaac. It was Isaac who became the father of Jacob and Esau and it was Jacob's sons who formed the 12 tribes of Israel.
- Joseph knew that someday the Israelites would be freed from Egypt. He remained faithful to God in his high position, but did not see the day they were delivered from Egypt.
- Moses brought the people out of Egypt, gave them God's commandments, but because of their unbelief, they wandered the desert for 40 years. When they finally reached the promised land, Moses only saw it from afar, but never entered into it.
- I would add to this that the disciples in Jesus' time believed that he would come again in their lifetime. They lived their lives believing that. And we should be too.

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea...by faith the walls of Jericho fell...by faith Daniel was spared from the lion's mouth...by faith the three were saved from the fiery furnace...

Let's transition from Hebrews to Luke. Though these witnesses to our faith are not included in Paul's list, they certainly are witnesses for us.

By faith, Mary had found favor with God and was given the gift and the sorrow of giving birth to the Savior of the world. “Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19). Raising the Son of God I’m sure presented the same challenges as any mother would endure. But to watch her son die on the cross for the sins of the world....only faith could get her through that.

By faith, Joseph did not divorce Mary, but remained faithful to her, becoming the earthly father to Jesus. It was his faith that allowed Joseph to hear and obey the words of the angels in his dreams; the first to remain with Mary and the second to flee with his new family to Egypt; and the third to return to Nazareth after the death of Herod. Again, this must have been a very difficult time, but it was his faith and trust in God that got him through it all.

By faith the shepherds went to the place where the baby was born. What must their faith have been for the angels to appear to them? And for them to respond with such obedience? They could have just stayed in the fields, but they were faithful and obedient. They went to the stable, saw the baby and began to proclaim the good news right away. First to those in Bethlehem...and then they continued to share when they returned praising and glorifying God.

By faith the wisemen came in search of the King of the Jews. They saw the star and wanted to come worship him. It is amazing that they would be included in the

birth story. They knew very little if anything at all about the prophecies of the Messiah. But they knew enough to want to seek him out. They believed without seeing him. They followed the star without knowing where they were going or what they would find when they got there. They fell down to worship a baby, who performed no miraculous signs, they heard no teachings, or saw no signs of divinity – just a tiny baby on his mother’s knee.

These are faith stories. People who were called by God for a purpose. They listened, and they obeyed, often without really knowing what was going to happen or how it was going to happen.

So let’s talk about faith. Our scripture this morning defines faith as the evidence of things not seen. If I were to tell you that I had a dollar in my pocket and you chose to believe me, you are exercising faith. You trust me, that I would be telling you the truth, without ever seeing the dollar. But if I pull it out of my pocket and you see it, faith is destroyed and replaced by knowledge. You now know that I have a dollar. Hebrews 11:1 says that faith is the evidence of things not seen. If you can see it and touch it, you don’t need faith. Craig Grostchel says “If you always feel the presence of God you wouldn’t need faith.” God gives us glimpses, moments which become corroborating evidence and wants us to make a choice to take a step of faith in the direction the evidence is pointing. But we will not have full

knowledge until we are with him fully. Going back to 1 Corinthians 13, it says that now we know in part but then we will know fully as we are fully known.

Brene Brown is a doctor of social work and a professor at the University of Houston. She defined faith by conducting research and interviews: “Faith is a place of mystery; where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.” We spend so much time trying to prove our faith, trying to turn faith into certainty, that we don’t always exercise faith.

William Barclay says “faith is the hope which looks forward with conviction.” I know God is good...I know God is with me...I know God will see me through. That is faith. Those to whom the letter was written wanted to look back. They were not stepping forward into the unknown. They were not living by faith.

Faith is a spiritual gift. It is more than belief in Jesus Christ, but it is an abiding foundation of confidence that God works all things together for good, and that the people of God can rise above any obstacle. People with the gift of faith hold fast to the deep conviction that no matter what we see with our eyes, we can trust the promises and plan of God.

Warren Wiersbe says “it takes more faith to endure than to escape.” He was talking about how some are healed or delivered from their difficult circumstances

and others are not. Faith means that we trust God even if He does not deliver us. That is faith.

We are called to live by faith. Faith is not blind optimism. We have evidence of God's presence in our lives and in the lives of others. We grow in our faith by walking with the faithful. By listening to their stories. By telling and embracing our own stories.

This sermon started with a list of witnesses to our faith. Who are the cloud of witnesses in your life? Whose stories have impacted your faith journey? Whose lives have your stories touched? This is the power of the faith community. We come together, supporting one another in our faith journey, encouraging one another to grow, helping each other in our times of weakness, and celebrating in times of joy.

By faith, a woman receives discouraging news about her health and gives thanks to God for his presence in her life, accepting whatever will happen.

By faith, a woman is devastated when she loses her job, but trusts that God will bring good out of it, only to find the job He leads her to is perfect for her gifts and skills.

By faith, a family going through a divorce holds on to the promises of God that he will work together for good and make all things new.

By faith, a young woman goes to a foreign country as a missionary, being obedient to God but feeling very uncertain what she will find there.

By faith, a mission team goes to Cuba, fearful of customs and government interference, facing the unknown of how God will use them.

By faith, a woman steps away from a successful job after 20 years and goes into full time ministry.

I want you to think about those who have impacted your faith journey. On the count of three I want you to lift up their first names; you can say more than one for most of us have more than one, so that we can celebrate this great cloud of witnesses. 1...2...3...

As we enter into this New Year, let us take a step forward and live a life of faith.

There will be challenges. There will be illness, loss, heartache, injustice. There will be joys, celebrations, and victories. And God will be there through it all.

In closing, let me leave you with three things to help you on your faith journey in this New Year:

1. Look around at the witnesses. We have a great cloud of witnesses right here in this church. Listen to their stories. Share your own stories. The exciting thing for me about our church vision is that we are intergenerational. It is not just the elders of the church who have stories to tell. I was so blessed and

moved and inspired by the participation of our children in the Christmas musical. And a child shall lead them! We have a great cloud of witnesses. Look to them. Walk with them. Grow with them.

2. Look at yourself. In Hebrews 12:1, the author states that we must strip off the weight that slows us down and especially the sin that trips us up. One commentary stated that the sin the author is talking about here is the sin of unbelief. Search inside yourself to see what it is that is holding you back from living a life of faith. Let us enter into 2019 saying “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” Say that with me “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”
3. Look to Jesus, who initiates and perfects our faith. Jesus gave us an example. He lived a life of faith. He prayed regularly which was evidence of a life of faith. It was his faith that enabled him to endure all that he went through for us, even death on a cross. As we trust in Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith, his power is released into our lives.

So PHUMC, are you ready to live by faith? **12** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin of unbelief. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. Let us look forward with hope and conviction, not back. Let us keep our eyes focused on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.

