

“By Faith . . .”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16**

What is faith? How do we live by faith? Is faith measured by what we do, or why we do things? What is faith?

I would challenge us to consider how faith leads us to behave, decide, and live our lives. Do you do something out of fear or out of hope? Did you come to church today out of duty or out of joy and desire? Do you assist someone in need out of guilt or out of genuine concern? Faith is more than believing who someone or something is; faith is about believing in someone or something.

In a very real sense, faith is rooted in hope. Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian minister, whose books touched me deeply while I was in seminary. He speaks to pastors on preaching on hope, and in doing so he speaks to all of us. He writes:

If preachers decide to preach about hope, let them preach out of what they themselves hope for.

They hope that the words of their sermons may bring some measure of understanding and wholeness to the hearts of the people who hear them and to their own hearts. They hope that the public prayers they pray may be heard and answered, and they hope the same for the private prayers of their congregations.

They hope that the somewhat moth-eaten hymns, the somewhat less than [generous] offerings, the somewhat self-conscious exchange of the peace may all be somehow acceptable in the sight of the One in whose name they are offered. They hope that the sacrament of bread and wine may be more than just a perfunctory exercise.

They hope that all those who come to church faithfully week after week may find at least as much to feed their spirits there as they would find staying at home with a good book or getting out into the fresh air for some exercise. At the heart of all their hoping is the hope that God whom all the shouting is about really exists.

And at the heart of the heart is Christ – the hope that he really is what for years they have been saying he is. That he really conquered sin and death. That in him and through him we also stand a chance of conquering them ([http://www.pulpit.org/articles/preaching\\_on\\_hope.asp](http://www.pulpit.org/articles/preaching_on_hope.asp)).

The writer of Hebrews gives us a glimpse of this faithful hope in the eleventh chapter of his letter. For him, faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” To have faith in something you cannot see is difficult, since we would prefer to hold stock in something right before our eyes. But as Hebrews reminds us,

Abraham and Sarah had nothing in front of them to believe in, only God's vision to them of what their life would be like if they trusted God. And in three actions, Abraham showed faith in God: by taking his family from his homeland to a foreign place; by staying in this promised land; and by believing that he would one day have children of his own through Sarah, his wife.

Fred Craddock, in his commentary on Hebrews in the New Interpreter's Bible, writes: Hebrews 11 provides the raw material for drawing a profile of faith as it has characterized the people of God throughout salvation history. Faith is not simply belief that there is a God but trust that God "rewards those who seek him" (verse 6). Faith has a long memory and profits from the experiences of our forebears. Faith also hopes (v.1), looking beyond the immediate to God's future (vv. 10, 13, 26, 35, 40). Faith is tenacious and enduring, able to accept promises deferred in the conviction that death itself does not annul God's promises. Faith is not coerced; believers always have the option of returning to "the land that they had left behind" (v.25). Faith is subjective, to be sure, a conviction firmly held (v.1); but it is not solely subjective, since it is the substance, the essence, the very being of things hoped for (v.1) (Fred Craddock, New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 12, Abingdon Press, Nashville, © 1998: 146).

While faith is measured by our current living, it also reflects our belief in God's future. And as the writer of Hebrews tells us, "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them." All the saints who have preceded us could not see what the "city of God" would be like, but they had faith that it existed, and thus they believed. They believed in God, and trusted that God would provide throughout their life. Some might call it "blind faith," but in truth, it was really a faith that could see everything.

Faith is trusting in God that you will make the faithful decisions and choices, even when you know you will not witness how future generations of people will benefit from them. I have been actively praying about that recently as it relates to Camp Pyoca, our presbytery's camp in Brownstown, Indiana. I serve on the camp's advisory council, and we have just completed a visioning process with consultants about who we are as a camp right now, and where we are positioned to be for the future. We received their 57-page strategic plan last month, and our advisory council will be meeting Saturday to begin discerning how God is leading us through this work for our future. The decisions we will be making in the weeks and months ahead will impact generations to come through camping ministry in our state and region. And yet many of us may not see first-hand the affects of those decisions. That is when it comes down to faith: trusting that what we're doing is by faith and through faith in our living, loving God.

Here at John Knox, what will we do when we are called to another step of faith? When we come to Saturday, August 27, the date of our community picnic, will we decide at the last minute we can't make it? Or will we come to the picnic and meet our guests, welcome our neighbors, get to know their names, and invite them back?

When we are encouraged to invite a friend to church next month, how will we respond in faith? Will we let it get lost in the shuffle of everything that consumes our calendars, and expect the next person to follow through? Or will we intentionally talk to someone we know well, and ask them to come on September 18 with us to John Knox?

How can we sincerely hope for a new future if we are not willing to faithfully choose now to follow God? How can we preach and pray for new life, new disciples, and new ministries, if we aren't willing to freely open ourselves to the Spirit of God? How can we live in hope if we live in fear? How can we live in faith if we don't faithfully live?

But you know what? Those are the easy tests of faith. The tough tests of faith are the ones that make us ponder God's existence at all. When our children suffer from disease, or addiction, or poor decisions, how does our faith assure us that God will provide? When we watch our spouse, our parent, our friend wither away in front of us because of Alzheimer's or Parkinson's or cancer, how does our faith assure us that God will provide? When a colleague, a fellow member of the church, a stranger who has wronged us comes and asks for forgiveness, how does our faith assure us that God will provide? The real tests of faith are not the ones that challenge us how much to give, how to spend our time, or which direction to take. The real tests are the ones that show everyone what we are made of – deep, deep down.

My hope for you – for each of you – is that you will believe with your whole being that God lives in each of you, because of the faith that has been placed in your hearts. The assurance of my faith is that God will find a way to make all of us the disciples we are meant to be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.