

Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

Heb. 11:1 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.

Heb. 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

Heb. 11:13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were

strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

TOO MANY QUESTION MARKS

In a little town in British Columbia a woman named Ma Murray edited the town's newspaper. Murray was a social activist and every issue of her paper took up some cause with a vengeance.

Ma was so passionate about her subject that little things, like punctuation marks, were not important to her. Her sentences would go on and on before she decided to throw in a period, and she didn't put quotation marks around things other people had said.

As you can imagine she did receive some criticism. Some people said, "If you're going to publish a newspaper you're need to do it right. Take the time to put in the punctuation marks!"

Ma Murray did not take criticism well. So, in the first issue of her newspaper each year she would fill up the first page with nothing but punctuation marks. Commas, colons, quotation marks and question marks were all there on the front page.

She said, “I’ve given you all the punctuation marks you need for the whole year. Just use them wherever you think they’re necessary!”

Ma Murray was wrong. Punctuation marks make all the difference in life. Consider the difference between an exclamation point and a question in this sentence. I love you! I love you?

The same is true in the Christian life. Many of us approach life with a question mark. Instead of boldly saying, “I believe!” We say tentatively, “I believe?” Our life is filled with question marks. We are filled with fear and doubt.

Faith does not come easily to us.

There is too much that we do not know. There is too much that we cannot see. There are too many hopes and dreams that do not pan out. There are too many tragedies that cloud our joy.

SCARED TO DEATH

We're like the little boy who moved with his family to a new community and a new church. The Sunday school class required each student to quote a memory verse to the entire congregation.

The boy was terrified at the prospect so they gave him a short and appropriate verse from Matthew 14:27, "It is I, don't be afraid."

The boy practiced his verse all week. He said it at the breakfast table. He said it at suppertime. He said it before he went to bed. Finally, he was able to say it without hesitation.

After the class trooped into the sanctuary to say their verses the little boy closed his eyes and kept repeating the verse, "It is I, don't be afraid. It is I, don't be afraid."

Suddenly it was the boy's turn. He opened his eyes, saw 200 adults staring at him, and he panicked. With nowhere to hide and nowhere to run, he finally blurted out, "It is me, and I'm scared to death!"

The moment of truth has a way of making even the most faithful say, "It's me, and I'm scared to death."

Mother Teresa put it well when she said, “I know that God will not give me anything that I can’t handle. I just wish he didn’t trust me so much.”

Fear has a way of putting questions in our hearts and minds. It makes us (as the apostle Paul put it) “see through a glass darkly.”

SEEING THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

The letter to the Hebrews was written to some folks whose glass was very dark.

They were Jewish Christians who were facing persecution at every turn. Legions of Roman soldiers had marched through Palestine. They plundered Jerusalem. They killed the priests. They destroyed the Temple.

This was a crushing experience for those who had grown up in the Jewish faith. They had suffered a lot throughout their history. They had endured more than most.

But, one of the things that kept them going was the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the place where God promised to meet them. It was a prominent and

visible symbol of God's presence and God's steadfast love.

And now it was gone!

What do we do when our Temple falls? What do we do when all the visible symbols of our faith come crashing down? What happens when the one we love the most disappoints us? What happens when our anchor in life fails? What happens when we really do "lose our religion?"

Presbyterians believe in a doctrine called the perseverance of the saints. That means that those whom God has called in Jesus Christ shall never be lost. God's salvation is secure. No matter what happens God will be with us on our journey home.

But, despite that comforting belief, sometimes it seems like our life has taken a rather significant detour. We might not be lost, but it sure seems that way.

The front page of our life is filled with question marks. What good is religion if it lets you down? Where is God when you need God most? We strain to see, but our vision is clouded. We read the promises, but they bring no hope.

The Presbyterian minister and writer, Frederick Buechner once wrote that the questions of life are the “ants in the pants” of faith. Doubts keep faith alive and moving. Perhaps that is true in some cases.

But, sometimes the questions of life are overwhelming. Sometimes our doubts are not like ants. Sometimes our doubts are like the whirlwind. They threaten to blow us away.

C.S. Lewis in his book, “A Grief Observed” wrote that the death of his beloved wife of only two years exposed his childish faith. What he thought was a mature faith was instead a house of cards that came tumbling down under the pressure of this crisis.

Many of us know what Lewis is talking about.

BLIND FAITH

It was the same thing that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews was talking about when he wrote, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” When the Temple fell and life as the Hebrews knew it was gone forever, faith was necessarily a blind faith.

Their faith had to be based upon more than a Temple that they could see and touch. Their faith had to be based upon a hope that was above and beyond any earthly temple. Their faith had to be based on a city that was above and beyond the reach of marauding armies and the evil that often invades our life.

Martin Luther King wrote, “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” In other words living by faith involves trusting in things that are beyond our vision and experience.

In a way that’s a description of what it means to become mature.

Sometimes when our toddlers come into the sanctuary for the children’s sermon they spot mommy. And they don’t like it when they have to leave mommy. Leaving the one they love the most is very unsettling.

You see, when you’re a toddler the world is only as big as your senses. What you see is what you get and nothing more.

But, somewhere along the line we learn that life is bigger than our experiences. We learn to accept the

fact that the world is, at least to a certain extent, trustworthy.

When your mother leaves, she returns. There is time and place for everything, a time to eat, a time to play and a time to go to bed. This ability to believe that the world is a trustworthy place is the beginning of emotional maturity.

Learning to have faith is a similar process. Just as the toddler learns to trust the reliability of his or her mother so we must learn to trust God.

There is more to our world than just what we can see here and now. There is a hope that is above and beyond the difficulties of this moment.

BEYOND THE SUNSET

Some of you were here several weeks ago when Jeannie sang the old gospel classic, Beyond the Sunset. The song is beautiful, but I found the story behind the song to be even more fascinating. For those of you who may have missed it, I'll give you a brief synopsis.

The song "Beyond the Sunset" was born at the dinner table of the Brocks' home one night in 1936. Before

dinner, text author Virgil Brock and his composer-wife Blanche watched a very unusual sunset at Winona Lake, Indiana, with a blind guest Horace Burr and his wife, Grace. Burr was Brock's cousin. A large area of the water appeared ablaze with the glory of God, yet threatening storm clouds gathered overhead.

Upon return to his home, at dinner, they still talked about the unusual spectacle they had earlier witnessed. What was amazing was what their blind guest excitedly commented, that he had never seen a more beautiful sunset.

When someone asked how Horace could see the sunset, the blind Horace's reply was simple and touching: *"I see through other people's eyes, and I think I often see more; I see beyond the sunset."*

The striking inflection in his blind cousin's voice forcibly deeply moved Brock. He began to write the first few measures of what is now "Beyond the Sunset" at the same time he started singing with his coined words.

His wife loved it; they went to the piano, and enhanced the first verse. The blind Horace Burr strongly urged that a verse about the storm clouds be

added. A third verse was further added. Before dinner ended, all four stanzas had been completed and sang by them.

That's what today's lesson is trying to teach us. In the difficult times when we are blinded by problems we need to look beyond the sunset. We need see beyond the problems and the storm clouds of life to a greater hope.

FAITH CALLS US FORWARD

Faith is the certainty of what we do not see. In this sense faith always calls us forward. Faith asks us to look beyond the sunset to the glory that lies above. Faith tells us that the ultimate meaning in life is always ahead of us.

Our lesson for today gives us an example of that kind of faith, Abraham. Abraham at God's behest is always on the move. Abraham is always going to the place that God shows him.

The Scripture tells us that Abraham didn't really know where he was going. But, he went anyway. He went because he believed that God was leading him. And Abraham figured that if the God who created the universe was leading him, a road map wasn't

necessary.

So Abraham at a ripe old age loaded up his family and struck out on a journey of faith that lasted the rest of his life. God not only promised Abraham a land in which to live; God also promised Abraham a family.

But many years went by and nothing happened. Abraham and Sarah weren't Spring chickens. In fact they weren't even Fall chickens. They were (as the Bible puts it) as good as dead.

And yet it was at this moment in their lives that the promise came true. A son named Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. And from that son came all the children of Israel, the chosen people.

A HEART FOR ETERNITY

In some ways Abraham never found what he was looking for. Abraham wandered throughout the Promised Land his whole life but he never settled down. He was a nomad. His home was a tent.

And this was true not only for Abraham but also for his son and grandson, Isaac and Jacob. The journey lasted for generations, but they never gave up hope. They had their eyes set beyond the sunset. They

longed for a “better country—a heavenly one.”

The apostle Paul once wrote, “If, for this life only, we hope in God, then we are to be pitied more than all men!”

But, of course this is not the case. Paul goes on to say that Christ was raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who will be raised with him. Life is more than just this brief time on earth. Our hearts long for a greater place; it is a place that Christ goes to prepare for us.

William Wordsworth put it beautifully in one of his poems when he said, “Our souls have sight of that immortal sea.”

I believe that is profoundly true. God has placed eternity in our hearts. And it is the call of the eternal that beckons us to go forward. It is the call of the eternal that cause us to take the next step ... even though we cannot know where the path will lead.

Talk of a heavenly home has been out of fashion in some theological circles these days. But, this has always been a big part of the biblical story. The Bible would have us focus our attention on the things that are above and not on the things that are below.

(Colossians 3:1-2)

Sometimes the kind of person we are is determined by the goals we set. If our goals are too low, we are invariably less than we should be. The goal of the faithful is none other than the kingdom of God. Yes, that does represent a hope that is in the future. Yes, that does represent a hope that we cannot grasp on our own.

But, when we set our minds upon that future, heavenly hope, today becomes better as well. We learn to walk by faith and not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7) We learn to stand on the promises and trust the biblical promise that underneath are the everlasting arms. (Deuteronomy 33:27 KJV)

GOD CATCHES US

The late Henri Nouwen told of going to see a German trapeze group, “The Flying Rodleighs.” He was mesmerized by their breath-taking performance as they flew gracefully through the air.

At the end of the show he spoke with the leader of the group and asked how he was able to perform with such grace and ease so high in the air. The leader responded,

“The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and wait for him to catch me.

The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher. I’m not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me.”

When trouble comes, we often try to grab on to God. We think that if we can just pray harder or promise to live better that we can somehow catch a blessing. That’s the worst thing we can do. That’s not our job. And quite often our desperate efforts to save ourselves get in the way of faithful living.

Today I invite you to let go and let God. I invite you to trust in the everlasting arms that will catch you when you fall. I invite you to put your hand in the hand of the One who will lead you all the way home.

Have faith.

Amen.