

PIONEERS IN FAITH

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

Dr. Michael A. Roberts August 8, 2010

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Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By 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.

⁸By 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. ⁹By 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. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By 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. ¹²Therefore 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.” ¹³All 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, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But 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.

By faith, Abraham set out, not knowing where he was going. Have you ever had that experience? You set out on a new road but you have no idea where you're going or where you will end up.

Perhaps you receive a diagnosis that changes everything in your life and you can not imagine where this road will lead. Perhaps you have had young children for what seems like so long-sweet, innocent, energetic children who all of sudden turn 13. The gentle ride turns into a bucking bronco and you don't know what's ahead. Or perhaps you've lost someone, someone you thought would always be there. The road ahead looks rough. How will you come out on the other side? Or perhaps you've made a big change- it's risky, adventuresome, scary. You're starting a new job or you've just moved to a new town or you are starting college or you finally got to retire or maybe you've walked in the doors of a new church.

You've set out not knowing where you're going. Much of life is like that. Many of us prefer life planned and orderly. But life is not always like that. Life can be very surprising, shocking, earth-shattering. The best laid plans can crumble before us. Proverbs 16:9 advises us: *“The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.”*

I'm sure that Abraham and Sarah had planned to settle down in good old Haran but the Lord directed their steps to the land of Canaan. Hebrews 11:8 says it was *"by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out to a place that he was to receive."*

In Hebrews 11, there is a listing of the faith hall of fame. Abraham by faith left his homeland, trusting in God to guide him. He is one of many who are highlighted here including Abel, Moses, Rahab, David and Samuel.

What is startling about this faith hall of fame is that so many did not see the fulfillment of their faith. They trusted God to bring about a great future but many died not having seen it. God called Abraham, Abraham followed as best he could, he took the next steps forward, but even Abraham did not see the total fulfillment of his faith in God's promises. Yet Abraham trusted and persevered. He knew well the truth of verse 6: *"Without faith, it is impossible to please God."*

This is true for us as well. We are 4,000 years removed from Abraham but the principle is the same- *"without faith, it is impossible to please God."* We also are called to trust in God's promises and follow as God guides us. We are called to take the next steps that God calls us to make.

Faith is one of the most common words that we use in the church. Faith, hope, and love. We walk by faith, not by sight. And so on.

Faith is used in different ways in the scriptures. At times, faith means faithfulness. This is the way Presbyterians often think of faith- being faithful in our responsibilities. God has given us opportunities and resources. God is calling us to be faithful in fulfilling our responsibility.

Faith is also used in the Bible in the sense of "the Faith". *"The faith once delivered to the saints."* The faith is the body of beliefs that comprise Christian doctrine. We defend the faith. We proclaim the faith. We support the mission of our church that enables us to proclaim the faith of Jesus Christ to many around the world.

Faith means faithfulness and the faith. The primary sense of the word faith in the scriptures though is trust. That's the best synonym for faith- trust. Everybody trusts someone- their spouse, their family, their friends, themselves. In scripture, the object of our faith or trust is critical.

We proclaim that salvation comes *"by faith alone."* Not by our good works, not by our prayers, not by our practice of the spiritual disciplines but by our faith, our trust in what God has done for us. One becomes a Christian by trusting. Placing our trust, our lives, our destiny in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Salvation is by faith alone. By trusting in God's promises to us.

The entire life of the Christian is also defined as trust in God. Trust does not just describe the initial experience as a Christian but the whole experience. We often forget this. All of us face

struggles in our life- with our work, our relationships, our health. We are called to trust God. To place our lives in God's hands. To be willing to hear and follow God's guidance. To believe that God loves us and cares for us each moment of our lives. This is what the apostle Paul means when he says *"we walk by faith, not by sight."*

Faith is hopeful. It is risky. It is bold. It visualizes a future that is not yet in existence. Faith, as Hebrews 11 says, *"is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*

Commentator F.F. Bruce says that "things which have no existence as yet become real and substantial by the exercise of faith."

And what is true for us as individuals is also true for us as a church. We are called to live by faith as a congregation. We are called to trust that God is at work among us. To believe that God's Spirit is guiding and leading us. To trust that God will be with us as we move forward in the future. To be confident that God will make clear the vision that we are to follow. To believe that God will give us the strength, the people, the resources to follow that vision.

Faith envisions a future with God. Faith is hopeful about a new existence. *"Things which have no existence as yet become real and substantial by the exercise of faith."*

Faith is also more than that though. Faith trusts God to bring new life. Faith also trusts God when nothing seems to be happening. Faith still trusts God even when the path ahead seems very dark indeed. Faith still trusts God even when life is incomplete, not what we expected at all. Faith still trusts God even when we don't know where the path ahead will end.

Hebrews 11 concludes this way: *"Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better."*

It is good to remember that our journey with God will always be incomplete in this life. Abram may taste the promises and see some fulfillment. But there is not complete fulfillment in his lifetime.

Some of us are really into completeness. We like closure. We really think our "In-basket" will be empty when we die. We want life to be tied up just so with a nice bow on top. But life's journey is most often not like that. The great leader Moses never lived in the promised land. The apostle Paul didn't reach all the towns for Christ that he wanted to. In the Lord's Supper we have only a foretaste of the future heavenly banquet. In our worship, we are sometimes given a fleeting glimpse of the eternal glory that is to come. But we're not there yet.

Abraham didn't see the complete fulfillment of God's promises in his lifetime. He lived a long time, but he didn't have that many descendants when he died. Israel was not yet a great nation, not by a long shot. In all his experiences, in all his ups and downs, he still only knew God partially.

All of us- as much as we pray, read the scriptures, diligently seek God's guidance- as much as we do- we still know God only partially. The reason we rejoice in life eternal is because our journey with God that begins in this life continues on forever. The journey only begins here, it continues on in the future life, what the author of Hebrews calls "*a better country, a heavenly one*".

So what do we do when we don't know where the road ends? We trust. We trust God to be present, to guide, to sustain us. I like the way Tom Long expresses it: the author of Hebrews "gives a roll call of the faithful, to name those in every generation who courageously swung out on the vine of God's promises over the chasms of life, trusting that the vine would hold. Time and again, the vine was secure; the promises of God held firm" (*Hebrews* p. 113).

And so we trust. We also persevere. One of the great themes in this chapter in addition to faith is perseverance, persistence in the Christian life, endurance in following Christ. Continuing on in the faith that we have embraced. Hebrews 11 is about pioneers in faith, people in the Old Testament who persisted, who persevered in the faith even in the midst of adversity.

There were many times in our own church when perseverance was needed. Last century there was a period of 27 years that our church history calls the "years of struggle" from 1922 to 1949. During this 27 year period, there were nine Stated Supply pastors. There were tough times in the 1930's when the church considered dissolving due to low financial support, no minister, and small membership. Despite years of struggle, this church persevered.

We remember those and so many others who have persevered in the faith. Those who have gone before us and provide encouragement and strength for our present and future ministry as a congregation.

Chapter 12 of Hebrews begins with the word "therefore". "*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*" We will look at these words more closely next week.

But the image here is of the many who have already run the race of their life, finished, and now watch us run, cheering us on. I think of the many in this congregation who ran their leg of the relay faithfully, who finished their race. The cloud of witnesses is the church triumphant, which supports and inspires us as we run.

Who's in the cloud of witnesses? There are many in church history. We celebrate and remember them. In the past 156 years, we have had many witnesses in this church. Do you know that The Church Register lists 2,943 people over the last 156 years who have been members of this church? There have been 239 people who have served here as elders. There have been 214 who have served as deacons. There have been 51 who have served as Trustees.

The pastors who have served this church have also witnessed to God's love and grace. Pastors like R.M. Overstreet, John M. McMurray, William Gillespie, M.C. Hutton, Alexander Gray, Jan

McMurry, James Van Vleck, Davis Taylor, Warren Hall, and David Duncan- 37 pastors in all in the past 156 years. As you might expect, my personal hero is M.C. Hutton who served the longest pastorate at this church from 1886 to 1921, a total of 35 years. Talk about perseverance!

So many important witnesses. These are important witnesses who surround us. We give thanks today for their faithful witness. One of the great privileges of serving as pastor of this congregation during this particular period in history is that I have been able to know and love so many of these witnesses. I was fortunate to come to this church at a time that enabled me to get to know men and women who have been leaders of this congregation really for the last fifty, sixty years of the church's life. It has been my privilege to officiate at many of their funerals and memorial services in the last 22 years. I treasure my relationships with these individuals, their great positive contribution to this church, their wise and far-sighted leadership. They have touched me and so many with their faithful witness.

Those who have gone before us are witnesses. They ran their race before us. There were times when they were tired and faced difficult circumstances and yet they persevered. They are witnesses to God and the strength that God gives us to help make it through life. Those witnesses remind us that the Christian life is not necessarily a comfortable life. But always a worthwhile one.

Commentator Donald Hagner sums up with these words: "The author's purpose in this magnificent section of (Hebrews 11) is to encourage the readers to emulate these heroes and heroines of the faith, who on the basis of what they knew about God and God's promises had the courage to move out into the unknown. With their hearts set upon, and their lives controlled by, a great unseen reality...This list of heroes is meant to provide the readers with strength and encouragement in their own difficult circumstances" (Donald Hagner *Hebrews* 1983 p. 179).

One of the prayers I use in my daily prayer life expresses this well. I've chosen it today for our prayer of thanksgiving. The prayer says:

"Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

And so we journey on. Trusting in God's promises. Following our servant Lord. Like Abram, there are times when we do not know where we are going. But we do follow the one who has gone before us: *"looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."* We trust his promises to us, we are sustained by his ongoing presence in our lives, we take the next steps, we know that God's leads us by the hand. We journey on step by step.

