



Lectionary 19, Year C

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9th Sunday after Pentecost: Epistle Text – Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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.

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, with Sarah's involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, 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."

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 homeland, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

SERMON TEXT:

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1

Faith, is what the Greek-speaking Christians to whom the author of Hebrews wrote, needed to be reminded of. Not that they needed faith, rather it seems that they needed a reminder of what faith was as an inspiration to keep moving forward in their journey as followers of Christ.

The community to whom the book of Hebrews was addressing had been through some rough times. Chapter 10 tells us of the sufferings and hardships this community had endured. The letter reads "But recall in those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting." (Heb 10:32-34)

These life experiences, along with the delay in the return of Christ, and the public pressure to worship Greek and Roman gods, the community to whom Hebrews was written were growing weary in the faith. Some became so weary that they began to neglect to meet together, as was their custom and the community, as a whole, was beginning to fall apart.

So in chapter 11 of the letter, the writer of Hebrews tells story after story about the ancestors who persevered because of their faith, beginning with the story of the creation.

By faith, we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God. By faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. By faith, Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death. By faith, Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household. By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And continuing through the complicated and messy stories of ancestors, including Isaac and Jacob, and Moses and the Israelites, the writer of Hebrews reminds their audience of the amazing things the people of God were able to accomplish because of the faith given to them by God.

One of the things that strengthens my faith, when it feels weary, is going out on our deck at night and star gazing. One of the gifts of where my family lives, in rural Southeast Michigan, is that there is less light pollution than in the city or the suburbs so, even in early evening, I can pick out my favorite constellations, Casseopia and Orion, when they are overhead. I have watched the Big Dipper move across the night sky as seasons progress and taken great delight in watching meteor showers and, last year, the appearances of the northern lights.

I marvel at the photographs that come from the James Webb telescope that show, in even greater detail, the storms on Jupiter, and the star formations outside our galaxy, light that has been in existence since before human kind appeared on earth. When I

have been asked why I believe in God, I think of these images, because my faith tells me that the intricate beauty of the universe didn't just happen by accident. Thus, for me, star gazing is a reminder that we are able to travel the journey of faith, even with the struggles and frustrations that come with it, because we have a creator who takes as much delight in us as the creator does in painting stars on the canvas of the universe.

Let's be clear, though, this reminder of faith as the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen is both a great gift and it comes with a great call.

In the Gospel text, Jesus names the difficult reality that comes with being a follower of Christ and a proclaimer of the Gospel. The message that God proclaims to God's people, whether through Moses, or the Prophets, or the early Christians, or even Christ himself, is challenging...even divisive, using Jesus' own words. And not because the God's word is intended to be divisive - on the contrary, it is intended to be liberating for us and for the whole world - for it proclaims God's desire that all of God's creation be able to live in the wholeness with which God created it. But Jesus saw first hand, very early in his ministry, that seeking true liberation for creation is offensive to our human sensibilities. So offensive that his own hometown tried to throw him off a cliff after his first sermon.

Jesus knew from the beginning that his teachings wouldn't bring peace. He knew that they would divide families and communities - because the work of liberating creation is hard work. It is, at times, inconvenient, and it usually comes with sacrifice.

In the age of self-care - which is absolutely important, let me be clear on that - sometimes we can conflate the peace of a quiet coffee shop, or the peace we are looking forward to in our homes when the kids go back to school, with the peace that Jesus says he isn't coming to bring. And while that peace is lovely, it's not the peace Jesus is referring to. The peace that Jesus came to proclaim is a peace that cannot be achieved until respect, dignity, and wellness are realized by everyone, regardless of race, economic status, where you come from or how you got here, who you love, what your identity is, how you dress, or what your abilities are.

This is work that isn't done until every single human being is free to live into the truth of who they are as God's beloved ones and can live that truth with dignity and respect. And more than that, it is work that isn't done until all of creation, from the tiniest amoeba to the largest redwood tree, knows restoration.

This is why the Gospel is so challenging - because it names the truth that in order for us to know God's peace, it's going to take work. And this work is hard because there are forces at work against God's desire for wholeness. There are forces at work that call the work of liberation divisive and whisper into our ears that this work is never going to get done so why should we bother with it in the first place? Just go back to your peaceful Sunday brunch and your peaceful evening tea, and everything will be fine, these forces say. Find your peace, let everyone else find it for themselves. These forces are constantly trying to counter God's word and it can get exhausting. And we can become weary. And we can begin to wonder if it is worth it or if we are on the right

path or even if the calling we thought we heard was actually a voice inside our heads.

This is why we don't do this work alone, why even Jesus didn't do the work alone - because even he had moments when he was weary. Even he - when he willingly went to the cross - wondered if God had abandoned him. But that, dear ones, is why we gather. That is why we are called to the table each week to be fed, so that we, as a community, may be nourished to go out into the world together, filled with the Holy Spirit, so that, as people called and claimed, we may continue in the work that Jesus calls us to through faith - seeking liberation for all creation.

For your liberation and mine are tied together. None of us are truly free until all of us are.

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