

## 11<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST ~ August 12, 2007

*Psalm 50:1-8, 22-2; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40*

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

*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. 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. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 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.*

*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.”*

*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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 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.*

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### **THE EDGE OF CERTAINTY**

Last weekend the gathered community at Family Camp was led in a discussion of Haggai – a short prophetic book in the Old Testament. In that story we hear about the distractions and difficulties that need to be overcome by the people of Israel as they seek to follow God. From that base we engaged in conversations about our own journey of faith – our own stumbling blocks. We were asked the question, “What convinced you that God is real?” The responses were varied in the group that I participated in. People talked about relationships with others, experiences of illness and death, answered prayer, addiction recovery, personal crisis and moments of tremendous peace. What came through as common ground was that we are convinced of God in relationship with one another and that none of what we had talked about could even remotely be considered “proof.” We concluded that much of what was meaningful in our lives was evidence of God only because we already believed – *the conviction of things not seen.*

***Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.***

Knowing that God is real – being sure of the risen Christ – experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit – is not something we can have a cast iron, provable certainty about. The ideas of faith, hope and trust are so central to the Christian life because there is so much that must be taken on faith – it cannot be proved. Faith is something that takes over when certainty ends. That is not to say that faith is based on nothing – just as we discovered in our conversation at camp, we can have a lot of experience of our relationship with God that backs up our faith, but that doesn’t mean we could prove to a scientist that it wasn’t all a mixture of wishful thinking and delusion. When your prayers are answered, you can’t prove that it isn’t just coincidence. Faith takes over when certainty ends.

Actually there are lots of things we do in life that are based on faith and not certainty. When Steve and I married it was not because either one of us could be certain what the other would be like for the rest of our lives. It was because of our shared experience that we had faith in one another – enough to make vows of commitment. When some of you left your home country and traveled to Canada – whether recently or in years long past – it was not because you could predict with certainty the future that lay ahead. You probably set out with hope based on whatever experience you had in your life's journey. We make lots of our everyday decisions without being able to be 100% sure that we are on the right track. We put our faith in our own ability to judge a situation, or in someone else's dependability and then step out, taking action on the basis of that faith. That's why doubt is not really the opposite of faith. Doubt is the opposite of certainty or of knowledge, but it is really a part of faith. Faith is the ability to keep taking action even when doubts are saying that this is not a good idea. Faith is only a relevant concept in areas where doubts exist. If you had no doubts you'd be acting on the basis of sure knowledge, not faith. If you had no doubts, you wouldn't need faith.

That is what makes these stories of the heroes of the faith so significant. They were able to step out and do extraordinary things without any solid proof that things would work out. And as the stories emphasize, they maintained their faith even when they didn't see things work out. They kept on trusting, acting on the basis of their faith in God, and believing that God's promises would all be made good.

***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.***

Abraham's journey of faith is about following the call of God to *go to a land that I WILL show you*. So much of our own journey of faith asks us to step out not knowing where we're going, but we're called to go anyway... without a road map or set of instructions. Perhaps this is why Abraham was considered righteous – not because he was willing to follow a nice set of instructions given to him by God – not because of a neatly outlined divine plan – but because he was willing to set out without those instructions – without a plan. We don't know where God calls us to, but we're still called to go, to begin and to continue the journey of faith even if we may not see the outcome.

Sometimes people get faith confused with certainty. The scripture says that *faith is the assurance of things hoped for*. It does not say that faith is as clear as day certainty. We get confused between our faith in the vision and our faith in the God who gives the vision. God offers us so many promises if we will respond in discipleship: salvation, resurrection, eternal life, fulfillment, wholeness, reconciliation.... But it is God that we need to grow to know, not the details of the promises. We are told that Abraham and Sarah set out, not knowing where they were going. They did not travel in the strength of a certainty about what the promised land was like. They traveled because they trusted God and they knew that God was faithful to take care of the details.

While I was a seminary student assigned to a congregation I was asked one morning about what heaven is like. I was taken aback by the question – I had never given it much thought because I don't think it matters very much. What matters is that we trust God, and follow the signposts God puts before us. I don't believe in God because I am promised good things any more than I love my children because they are helpful and kindhearted. My children are helpful and kindhearted because they are loved. I believe there will be divine good because I trust in God. A marker that says "go that way" is enough – if we trust God we will follow it. Abraham and Sarah did not need a sign that said "land of Israel, seated between a river and the sea, bordered by mountains with fertile valleys, 1348 km that way, see pictures in travel brochure below." God just said "set out" and they trusted God so they set out. Faith is not certainty about what we will find at the end of the journey, it is the belief in the goodness of God that assures us that the journey will be worthwhile.

***All of these died in faith without having received the promises***

And while faith may give us confidence that the journey will be worthwhile faith doesn't guarantee that we will live to see the fulfillment of the promises in which we have put our trust. We are reminded that all these people died without receiving the things God had promised, and yet they caught a glimpse of what was coming and that was enough to sustain them. That is a big challenge in our world today which is so addicted to instant results and immediate gratification. What is being celebrated in these verses is the willingness to go on trusting God without seeing any concrete results to demonstrate the value of doing so.

Too often we equate having faith in God with the belief that God will make sure everything goes smoothly in our lives. If we only have faith, we will prosper. If we only have faith, we will be protected from harm, from evil, from disaster, from pain and loss. We set ourselves up to believe that our faith in God is actually faith in God as a sort of guardian angel. But we limit ourselves and our faith, and we certainly limit God with that view of faith. Faith in God does not guarantee us some shield of protection that prevents bad things from happening in our lives. We all know or have known too many people who come to struggle and have doubts in faith because of a death of a loved one, because of loss or hardships suffered, seeing these events as a sign that God is not really there, or God does not really care, signs that faith in God is not warranted.

Our whole biblical witness calls out to us that this is not what faith is. Jesus tries to warn us throughout his teaching that our faith in God will likely cause us suffering, persecution, and bad intentions from those around us. Faith in God is no promise of an easy life, at least by society's standards. But before we get discouraged and figure this faith deal isn't such a good idea after all, we must remember that our faith is in God, not God's magical powers to bless us, but in God and God's unfailing love for us.

***If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God;***

God is not ashamed to be called our God when we, like Abraham and Sarah, can stop thinking of the land we have left behind – when we look to something better, something that is God's desire. Yes, we have made mistakes, we have sinned and caused pain or hurt to others – yet God loves us and because we know this we are able to look forward in hope. It is our faith that supports us even when our lives seem filled with loss or stress or worry or hardships. Our faith is in our God, that God is always with us and loving us, no matter what life brings our way.

We go forward in faithful hope not because we can point to some thing or experience or moment and say, "See; that proves it! God is real – I've put my hands in the wounds of Christ – I have glimpsed the Holy Spirit." We go out not because we are guaranteed success in every detail, but because our faith has prompted us to share the love of God that we have with others – answering a call because of faith. If we insist that our faith in God guarantee our protection, guarantee things go a certain way for us; our faith probably won't take us very far. But if we realize our faith in God provides us with what we really need – the knowledge of God's loving presence – we can journey far beyond the edge of certainty. In faith there is no limit to where God will take us. **Amen.**