

## **SERMON CCI Hebrews 11: 1-6 What is Faith? 2-3-19**

Anyone wonder what it means to have faith? Is faith a good feeling of belief? Is it different than positive thinking? “Everything always works out in the end.” Is faith the opposite of rational thinking? Some people think so. We Christians talk about leaps of faith, steps of faith, walking by faith, losing faith, the Christian or Muslim or Jewish faith as though faith is a list of beliefs we agree with. Jesus said that faith as small as a tiny mustard seed can move mountains. Don’t we say things like, “My faith got me through that hard time?” So what are we talking about when we talk about faith? For the next 5 Sundays, we will be learning from some people of faith described in Hebrews chapter 11, the Hall of Faith chapter. Let’s begin with what Hebrews says faith is.

The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who needed encouragement to hang onto their faith in hard times. The 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews describes how hard their life was: *“Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. <sup>33</sup> Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. <sup>34</sup> You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.”* I doubt that any of us here have experienced this kind of persecution because of our faith. And yet, we need the same encouragement to hang onto our faith in the tough times we face. This morning, we’ll look at two of the ancient people Hebrews puts forward to encourage our faith.

Hebrews 11 makes three statements about faith itself: First, *Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.* Another translation uses a stronger word, conviction, to describe what faith is. These words are okay, but the Greek word for faith is even stronger, and doesn’t depend on our memory or feelings. It’s a word that was used to describe the papers that were the legal evidence of ownership of a piece of property. Today we use the word title. When we purchase a house today, we pay a title company to search for who has the actual title to the property we’re buying. Because only that person or organization has the legal right to sell it to us. When we pay off the house, the title deed is ours. That’s what faith is- having the title deed to all the promises of God. We may not see those promises at the moment, they may still be in our future, but faith lets us pull out the title deed, and live as owners of the house in the meantime.

So we could translate this verse as “Now faith is the *title-deed* of things hoped for, the *proof or evidence* of things not seen.” Faith is living now as if the things hoped for are real. My father used to say, “If you don’t live what you believe, you don’t really believe.” The writer of Hebrews would agree. If our faith doesn’t affect the way we think and live, it’s not faith.

*Second, by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.* Hebrews takes us back to Genesis 1:1 “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” The word, formed, means to put things together in a way which perfectly fits them for an appointed purpose. God formed the universe with each piece fitted to work with the others. The sun shines in the day and the moon and stars at night. The seasons come like clockwork. Right now our hearts are beating and our lungs are providing oxygen and we don’t even have to think about it. Our kidneys are filtering our blood while we sit here. If I let go of this box of corn muffin mix, gravity drops it to the ground every time. Because God created gravity for a purpose. But it is by faith that we look at the beauty around us, the amazing universe, how our bodies work, and instead of merely appreciating it, we see evidence of God’s design. Science helps us understand the world we live in, but science can never explain how the world got here or why. It is by faith we believe that God created the world.

Third, from God’s point of view, faith is not optional. It is by faith that we believe God has a say about how we live in his world. That it is not enough to merely live “a good life” or to be a good person, but not have faith. Hebrews tells us “*Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*” Many people have a vague belief about a vague God somewhere out there, but they seldom give any thought to this God- until a problem comes. Their God is rather like Santa, you can’t see him, he does care about whether we’ve been good or bad, but we only need to worry about it during December when we want something from him. The writer of Hebrews says God is pleased by people who don’t just vaguely believe he exists. Faith means believing that God rewards those who draw near to him, and then living to please him. I saw this kind of faith last week when I visited Dodie Courtney as she recovers from her pneumonia. She was quite weak and tired, but her faith was strong. She knows it will take longer to recover than she wants, but she **knows** God is with her. And everything is OK

because, in her words, “God knows best.” Dodie **knows** God is with her, and she trusts in God’s faithfulness. My faith was encouraged talking with her.

Now let’s look at the 2 men in our scripture reading who are listed to encourage our faith. We find both of their stories in the book of Genesis. There we learn that Abel was one of the first two sons of Adam and Eve; the other son was Cain. Cain was a farmer, and Abel was a shepherd.

They both brought an offering to God; Cain’s offering was from his crops and Abel’s offering was from his sheep. God accepted Abel’s offering but rejected Cain’s, which made Cain so angry that he murdered his brother Abel. There are mysteries about this story. How did they even know to bring an offering to God? How did they know whose offering was accepted? Perhaps more importantly, why did Cain get angry rather than ask God to clarify what he had to do right next time?

*Whatever we may say about the two offerings, the real difference was in the heart.* Genesis 4:4 says that God looked with favor *on Abel and his offering*. The word order is crucial: God looked first at each man and then at his offering. God always looks at the heart first. When he looked at Abel’s heart, he found faith, and his faith was rewarded. God did not find such faith in Cain. Where there is no faith, even the finest offering makes no difference because God sees our heart.

There is no way around the fact that this is a story of tragic unfairness. Abel lived by faith and Cain rewarded his faith by brutally murdering him. It’s the story of any person who does the right thing for the right reason and then suffers because of it or their life is cut short in hatred and anger. Think of the missionaries and Christians around the world who are persecuted today. It would seem on the surface that living by faith wasn’t worth it. After all, Abel and they died because of their faith. But remember what the writer of Hebrews has already said about faith: *“anyone who comes to {God} must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”* Too often we look for our reward in our lifetime while God takes the long view. Cain may appear to have won on earth, but Abel is among those God calls his righteous ones who live by faith, and is with all those who have entered their heavenly home by faith. Abel is rewarded; Cain is not. Abel has a legacy of faith that still speaks to us today. Cain does not.

Enoch’s story in Genesis is very short. He lived 65 years, then he had a son Methuselah, and then for the rest of his life he walked with God so God allowed him to enter heaven without experiencing death. That’s it. We don’t know what Enoch’s walking with God looked like. Did he pray all the time? We also don’t

know what it means to go to heaven without dying. Did he float up to heaven like Elijah and Jesus? His story is so short, and yet, here he is in the Hall of Faith because he walked with God. Perhaps he's there so each of us can consider how we want to be remembered after we're gone- because we'll be remembered by the way we lived. What are we most known for? Walking with God? All the earthly accomplishments, all the awards and applause, all the education, and the degrees, all the money we accumulate, all the children we raise to fine adults have their place. But, could anything better be said as our legacy at our memorial service at the end of our lives than that we walked with God and now we live with God? We only do that by faith.

One final thing we learn from Abel and Enoch's stories is that though they both lived by faith, though they both pleased God, their lives progressed very differently. Enoch was translated to heaven without seeing death, and Abel died violently for his faith. Each of us who try to live by faith can identify with both Abel and Enoch. Sometimes, like Abel, people suffer for their faith without deliverance on this earth. Other times, God brings great deliverance in response to faith, like he did for Enoch. For most of us, the life of faith is a mixture of both victory and tragedy. Faith is what gives us the ability to live our lives trusting God's reality. No matter what happens in this life.

Russian Christian Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote of a moment when he was on the verge of giving up all hope. He was a political prisoner in the Soviet Union, forced to work 12 hours a day on a starvation diet. One afternoon, while he was shoveling dirt under a blazing sun, he simply stopped working, even though he knew that the guards would beat him, maybe even to death. He had seen it happen to others. But he felt he just could not go on. Then he saw another prisoner, a fellow Christian, moving toward him. With his cane the man quickly drew a cross in the dirt and walked away. Looking at the cross, Solzhenitsyn's entire perspective changed. **He knew** the God who was greater than the evil he saw in the prison camp. He grabbed hold again to the title to God's power and promises. Even though nothing about his situation had not changed, his renewed faith gave him the ability to live by faith that day and in the months of imprisonment that followed. And today, even after his death in 2008, his faith still speaks to us.

Here's what I've been asking myself: How would my life change if I truly lived as though God and his promises are real? What would I no longer be afraid of?

What would become more important? What would be less important? What legacy do I want to leave behind?

Today's scripture reading says "By faith, Abel..." and "By faith Enoch ..."  
When the time comes to add our names to the Hall of Faith, what will be said that we did "by faith?" By faith Merry... by faith Earl... by faith Roma... by faith Dawn... by faith Janine... by faith Woody... by faith Al... by faith Lavinia... by faith Daisy... by faith Community Church of Issaquah. What will it say we did by faith?

WELCOMING TWILA BARTLETT

Twila, do you confess with your mouth that you do believe that Jesus is Lord? *I do.*

Twila, do you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead? *I do.*

Twila, have you been baptized by immersion on profession of your faith?

*I have.*

Minister: Do you covenant to continue to grow as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, to love, support and pray for this congregation, and to use your gifts to build this body and serve in the world?

**New Member: *With God's strength, I will.***

Minister: Congregation, do you covenant or promise to also continue to grow as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, to love, support and pray for Twila and one another, and to use your gifts to build this body and serve in the world?

**Congregation: *With God's strength, we will.***

Minister: Twila, it is with joy that I welcome you as a beloved member of this church. May we as God's people grow in faith and share the gospel together.

I Corinthians 10 tells us:

<sup>16</sup> Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup> Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

At this table we come together as one body of Christ. Just as the pieces of bread we will eat are all cut from one loaf, so we who are many are one body. Look around at the body of Christ sitting around you. Smile at each other. Here we share the body of Christ for the body of Christ.