

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
August 7, 2016  
Pentecost 12  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 15:1-6  
Psalm 33:12-22  
Hebrews 11:1-16  
Luke 12:32-40

Our Scripture lessons today emphasize faith, defining faith as “the confident assurance that what we hope for will happen,” and “the evidence of things we cannot yet see” (Heb. 11:1).

These lessons then go on to introduce us to great examples of faith, people who are models to us, people who trusted and believed in God’s promise in their lives especially when *present* evidence of the fulfillment of those promises was lacking.

We have *Abraham*, who believed God’s promise that he would have a son and that through that son a nation with more people than stars would be born.

We have *Noah*, who believed God’s promise that a great flood was coming in spite of the fact that it had never even rained before, and who set to work building an ark.

We have *Sarah*, who believed that she would have a son, even though her childbearing years were long past.

When I read these stories, especially the stories of the people in Hebrews 11, I often find myself saying, “Wow, Lord. This is really something. Give me faith like that.”

But I want you to notice an intriguing and often overlooked verse in the epistle lesson. It is verse 13, which reads: “*All these faithful ones died without receiving what God had promised them, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed the promises of God.*”

Did you catch that?

The complete fulfillment of God’s promises to our “heroes” of faith ***did not come in their lifetimes***. They died while the story was still being written. They put themselves at stake, they risked and took action. They left behind home and family, they built an ark, they endured persecution, and they ***died*** before the final chapter to the story was written.

Let me ask you something this morning: If your father promised you something when you were little, and many years went by and you grew up and grew old and died before that promise had been kept, would it test your belief in your father?

A little boy was riding the bus back home from Sunday School (in the days of bus ministry!), so proud of the little card which he had made in Sunday School.

In bright glittering letters stuck to glue underneath were the words: “Have faith in God.”

As the bus turned a corner, a gust of wind came through the window and blew the card out of his hands and out of the bus into thin air. And the boy shouted, “Stop the bus! I’ve lost my faith in God!”

Let me ask you another question this morning: What is it that God is up to in your life -- what promise from Scripture are you trusting just now that looks as though it may never come to pass?

Let me remind you that these people we look up to in the faith, these heroic examples we think about when we pray, “Lord, help me be more like them,” *did not receive complete fulfillment of what God promised them in their lifetimes.*

They died...But they did not lose faith.

How did they do it?

I’d like to offer you a possible answer this morning. It’s from the life of Abraham, because he is our Old Testament example, but it applies to all heroes and examples of the faith.

At the end of the Genesis passage we read a pivotal verse in Genesis 15:6, where it says: “And Abraham believed the LORD, and the LORD declared him righteous because of his faith.”

I'd like to suggest to you this morning that when Abraham believed, it wasn't so much the *promise* he believed as it was the *God* who made the promise. The object of our faith is always God, not just God's promises.

Our faith is not a static thing, as though we drive a stake into the ground and cling to it. Our faith is clinging to God's promise that moves us through time and history. Our faith is a "confident wandering" because we are in relationship with the promise-giver.

This is what enables us to continue on, often not knowing where we are going next, trusting that even though we do not yet see the complete fulfillment of God's promise in our life, God can still be trusted.

This is exactly what Psalm 33 reveals to us today. The Psalm clearly indicates that our trust is in the *person* behind the promise, not merely the promise itself. Verses 21-22 say it clearly: "Indeed, our heart rejoices in him, for in his holy Name we put our trust. Let your loving-kindness, O Lord, be upon us, as we have put our trust in you."

And if you need more convincing, go with me to a pivotal verse in Hebrews 11, where we are told: "...it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that there is a God and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him."

If I were paraphrasing that verse, I would say that *faith is the pursuit of a relationship with the One who makes promises in our lives, not just the promises themselves.*

The people we look up to in our faith believed God's promises. But their faith was deeper than that. It went beyond the promises to build a relationship of trust with the God *behind* the promises. They people died without seeing complete fulfillment of the promises in their lives because they were focused more on the One making the promises than they were on the time-frame of their fulfillment.

I'm not sure where you are at in your spiritual journey today. But let me encourage you: **trust in God, not just His promise.** Keep moving, keep journeying, keep a flexible itinerary and a lighthearted attitude and approach to life. Spend more time developing your relationship with God, and less time worrying about *when* the things you've asked for will come to fulfillment in your life.

If you can do this, it will help you to enjoy the mystery of life, rather than seeing life as an exercise in futility, as the writer to Ecclesiastes did in our Old Testament lesson last week.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, I invite you to come and to renew your faith in the *Author* of the promises in your life, and not just the promises

themselves. Come in the spirit of poet Phyllis Robbins, who reminds us of our faith when she says:

*Faith is unseen but busy  
And different from idle yearning;  
Faith runs ahead and beckons us  
Beyond the road's next turning;  
Faith offers daily challenges  
To follow without knowing,  
Yet confident God holds our hand  
And plans the way we're going.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.