

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
August 11, 2013  
Pentecost 12  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

Back in the early 1970's the popular thing among many churches was bus ministry. Churches would buy old school buses and would drive through neighborhoods on Sunday mornings and pick up kids and bus them to Sunday School.

One Sunday a little boy was riding home from church on the bus, proudly holding a piece of construction paper. During Sunday School the kids had taken glue and had written the words "have faith in God" on their papers. Then they had sprinkled glitter on top of the glue, forming a nice piece of encouraging art they could now take home with them.

As the boy was riding along, the bus suddenly turned a corner, and a gust of wind blew through the window, taking his homemade sign out into never never land. As soon as the boy realized what had happened, he stood to his feet and shouted: "Stop the bus -- I've lost my faith in God!"

The people to whom the preacher of Hebrews writes were not on a bus, but they were experiencing a similar struggle. They hadn't been Christians for very long, and already they had faced serious repercussions for their faith. Many of

them had lost their homes and their property. The culture and the powers that be had virtually tried to shut them off from the trappings of a normal life.

Just prior to our text this morning the preacher reminds them of this, and tells them that they have need of faith, that they need to be strong.

And you can almost hear someone in the crowd shouting out the proverbial and rhetorical question: “What is faith?”

It’s as if the writer to Hebrews anticipates that question, and sets out to address it here in the beginning of chapter 11.

The answer that the preacher gives to the question is this: *faith is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see.*

Many of you may have grown up on these words from the King James Version: *faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.*

Now, most of us typically answer the question “what is faith?” by thinking of it in very concrete, specific terms, terms that relate to our daily lives, such as:

- \* Faith that you will pass the exam
- \* Faith that you will get that new job
- \* Faith that a loved one will be healed from disease
- \* Faith that a relationship might be healed

These types of specific applications of faith are certainly not wrong. But they are not exactly what the preacher here in Hebrews has in mind as he writes to his struggling congregation.

What does this writer mean, then? When he says, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen,” what does he mean?

Well, after citing a host of examples whom we could emulate, people such as Noah and Abraham and Sarah, the writer gives us a clue to his understanding of faith at the end of our text, beginning at verse 13.

Referring to the heroes of faith in times past, he says something very interesting. He says: “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” (v. 13).

As I thought about this statement this week, I struggled a bit. Something didn't quite add up. I thought, what do you mean these people died without receiving what was promised to them?

Take Noah. He was promised that he and his family would be saved from the flood if he would step out in faith and build the ark. He did, and he and his family *were* saved.

Take Abraham and Sarah. Abraham was promised that if he would leave his homeland and venture out in faith, God would make him the father of many. And he and Sarah were promised a son, even though Sarah was well beyond childbearing years.

And what happened? Isaac was born, and the rest is history. So what do you mean that they died before receiving the promise?

Obviously, the preacher here in Hebrews has something else in mind when he talks about faith. Listen again as he speaks about Abraham:

And even when he reached the land of promise, [Abraham] lived there by faith -- for he was like a foreigner, living in a tent. And so did Isaac and Jacob, to whom God gave the same promise. *Abraham did this because he was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God.* [vv. 9-10]

And here at the end of the passage the author says the same thing about *all* of the heroes of faith. He says, “they agreed that they were no more than foreigners and nomads here on earth.” (v. 13)

Then he continues:

Obviously people who talk like that are looking forward to a country they can call their own. If they had meant the country they came from, they would have found a way to go back. *But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a heavenly city for them.* [vv. 14-16]

Do you see how the writer to the Hebrews is speaking about faith in a bigger way? Do you hear him saying that there really **IS** something greater and more permanent towards which we are heading, something that can give us confidence and strength to go on, to press ahead in life?

When the preacher says here that Noah and the others died without having received the promise, he’s referring to experiencing fully the promised future that

God has for God's people. The Promised Land was more than just a parcel of ground in Palestine. It was (and is) the eternal city not built with human hands. It was (and is) the end of the journey, the promised future, life with God who made it all and who makes it all make sense.

Noted author and teacher Tony Campolo tells a story of his experience in a black congregation when he was a teenager growing up in Philadelphia. He says:

I belong to a black church in West Philadelphia. I grew up in that church. I'm the only white member of this 2,500 member congregation. I remember when I went to my first black funeral. I was seventeen years old. A friend of mine, Clarence, had died.

The minister was magnificent. He preached about the resurrection and he talked about life after death in such glowing terms that I have to tell you, even at seventeen I wished I was dead just listening to him! He came down from the pulpit. Then he went over to the family and spoke words of comfort to them. Last of all, he went over to the open casket and for the last twenty minutes, he preached to the corpse. Can you imagine that?

He just yelled at the corpse. "Clarence, you died too fast. You got away without us thanking you." He went down this litany of beautiful, wonderful things that Clarence had done for people. Then he said, "That's it, Clarence. When there's nothin' more to say, there's only one thing to say -- good night!" He grabbed the lid of the casket and he slammed that lid shut and he yelled, "Good night, Clarence! Good night, Clarence, cause I know, yes I know, that God is going to give you a good morning!"

Then the choir stood and started singing "On that Great Gettin' up Morning we shall rise, we shall rise."

People went up on their feet and they were in the aisles hugging and kissing each other and dancing. I knew I was in the right church, the kind of church that can take a funeral and turn it into a celebration. That's what faith is about. It's about the promise of eternal life, even in the midst of this life." [Anthony Campolo, "Trusting in God in the Days that Lie Ahead," Chicago Sunday Evening Club, Program 4604, October 27, 2002]

On this warm summer day, we gather here to worship, and in a few minutes to lay our friend and loved one Donna Beukelman to rest. And on the authority of the Scriptures that we proclaim, and with permission from the writer of Hebrews, we can say with confidence this morning: **“Good night, Donna! Good night, dear friend, because God has given you a wonderful, good morning!”**

As we come to the table this morning, I want to remind you that faith is not just for the concrete, specific needs of your life. These symbols of bread and wine tell you this morning that your life really IS going somewhere, that God is at work making all of the pieces fit even when you don't see it.

And the bread and wine this morning are invitations to you. They invite you to believe that ultimate reality lies more in what you've *yet to see* than what you currently see. They call on you to remember that this world is not your home. You're just passing through.

So travel light, and be at peace. One day -- perhaps sooner than you realize -  
- you'll be glad you did.

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