

By Faith We
Hebrews 11.1-28
Sunday, August 8, 2018
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

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

What is it that we are doing when we gather here? We've circled around this question a lot for weeks or months or years. If we're not here for committees, not here out of duty or obligation, not here for plaster and HVAC repair, what is it that we are about? Why aren't we at brunch? What is the thing that gets us out of bed in the morning, motivates our work, guides our days, shapes our path? What is this faith?

The Hebrews Preacher is speaking to the heart of this question, too, as he builds toward the end of his sermon and challenges both early church and present church to consider what is happening in the life of a gathered people. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen....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." (vv 1 and 3)

What do we hope for? What is already proven that we have not seen? What is the mystery that draws us out and draws us together and draws us forward?

For some time, in my early 20s, initially, but even in ways I don't fully understand now, I have been drawn to Frederick Buechner's words on faith. His are the first words I read when I am at the end of my rope, near giving up, not sure what the next step will be, and in need of words of assurance from a preacher, pastor, writer who has walked this road before.

In *Wishful Thinking* he writes, "Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you're going, but going anyway. A journey without maps. Paul Tillich said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."¹

Faith is something we're doing, somewhere we are going, a path we are on. We will doubt our direction, but even that doubt is part of the journey. The kind of faith we are

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. ??

about *here*, in this place, as people of God on the way of the Christ, is a particular kind of journey.

To that, Buechner adds, "Faith is the word that describes the direction our feet start moving when we find that we are loved. Faith is stepping out into the unknown with nothing to guide us but a hand just beyond our grasp"² Now *that's* taking us somewhere, isn't it. We are on a journey without maps, moving *in* faith and *through* faith, reaching for the guiding hand that is just beyond our grasp. Utter and total mystery.

Consider this: if you've walked a labyrinth, the circular prayer walk found in old cathedrals, sometimes rolled out (like we did here a few years back) on giant floor canvas, or drawn in brick and stone like the one in Audubon Park near the Tree of Life, then you've made this walk with your feet. The labyrinth draws us near to the center, easily at first, as though the walk of faith and spirit and mystery is as simple as entering in, but surely and quickly, the walk spirals us around, back out to the edge, near again to the center at another turn, then away just as surely. The labyrinth is a meditative walk and has as many interpretations as it has participants, but the word I have needed for my entire adult life and need very much today is that the walk is the journey. Sometimes near to the center, sometimes at the very edge of the inside³, our feet are on the path as we move around and around.

The Hebrews Preacher is challenging an audience ready to give up and walk away to consider: What can we do by faith? What do we already do by faith?

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

Assurance and Conviction. I'm grateful to the work of Amy Peeler, Professor of New Testament, in her study of Hebrews.⁴ She guides us today to consider these words "assurance" (upostatis) and "conviction" (elegchos) in the Preacher's "two statements about faith." Some of you will love this, and some of you will wander off in your minds for a couple of minutes. Stay with me, though, as we listen to what this *faith* is.

² Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, p. ??

³ "Edge of the inside" is a phrase used repeatedly by Fr. Richard Rohr

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2943

“First, faith is *upostasis*; etymologically, this term indicates a standing (*stasis*) under (*upo*). Thankfully, this word appears two more times in Hebrews, shedding light on its meaning for this author.”

For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. (Hebrews 3:14)

Here the Preacher “and his readers have become sharers of Christ, a relationship that will endure as they hold fast the beginning of *upostasis* firm until the end. The notion of a foundation of belief or a confidence of belief makes sense here. This foundational meaning fits also in the other occurrence in Hebrews 1:3.”

“He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.” (Hebrews 1:3a)

The exact imprint of God’s very being; “the author states that Jesus is the imprint of God’s *upostasis*. He is the picture of the foundation or bedrock of God’s identity -- hence many translations have ‘being’ here. The two other instances of the word in the New Testament also carry the idea of confidence (2 Corinthians 9:4; 11:17). If *upostasis* is something basic, something solid, something firm, then it provides a place to stand from which one can hope.”⁵

Faith provides a place to stand from which we can hope.

“Second, faith is *elegchos*. Here, the author of Hebrews has stretched our vocabulary skills because this word appears only here in all the New Testament. It is not uncommon in the Septuagint [the Greek translation of the Old Testament] where it appears over thirty times, primarily in the wisdom literature. In almost every instance the connotation of the word is quite negative. It is translated as ‘reproof,’ ‘rebuke,’ or ‘conviction.’ *Elegchos* is evidence brought forth that the person doesn’t usually want to hear. Only twice does Job use the term more generally as “proof” (Job 16:21; 23:4). That sense of proof or usually translated as ‘evidence’ is not wrong here, but I can’t help but wonder,” Peeler writes, “if the disciplinary connotation doesn’t have a place as well. For an author who will reflect on the loving discipline of God in the following chapter (Hebrews 12:5-11), he might be foreshadowing that discussion here. Faith presents that proof, even that rebuke, of things that you have difficulty seeing. If this community is beginning to struggle with doubt about God’s good character, they may

⁵ emphasis added

need this jolt. You can stand firmly upon faith, and you will not want to deny or reject the evidence it presents."

Faith presents proof of things (even a rebuke of things) that we have difficulty seeing.

Faith is something we're doing, somewhere we are going, a path we are on. Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. Faith provides a place to stand from which we can hope. Faith presents proof of things (even a rebuke of things) that we have difficulty seeing.

That's all well and good, Preacher, but what are we supposed to do with those pretty words? You seem to have spent a lot of time writing this thing out, Preacher, but what does any of that really mean? How are we to know what faith actually looks like?

Well, if you ask a Preacher to get to preaching, then it will go something like this. Our third reading this morning begins in Hebrews 11:1—

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

4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. **5** By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." **6** And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. **7** By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

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 he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised...

17 By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, **18** of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." **19** He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. **20** By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. **21** By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, "bowing in worship over the top of his staff." **22** By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

23 By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. **24** By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, **25** choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. **26** He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. **27** By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. **28** By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. **30** By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. **31** By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— **33** who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, **34** quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. **35** Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. **36** Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. **37** They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— **38** of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, **40** since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, **2** looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Faith is something we're doing, somewhere we are going, a path we are on. Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. Faith provides a place to stand from which we can hope. Faith presents proof of things (even a rebuke of things) that we have difficulty seeing. And when we are about to give up, at the end of our rope, ready to walk away, we have the stories that guide us from the beginning of time to the beginning of this congregation to the beginning of our lives to the beginning of this next breath. By faith, we keep walking. By faith, we stand under the great hope that covers all people and all time and assures us that God is at work. By faith, we see what really is, even when what is revealed is ugly and cruel, in need of repentance and repair, and we set to work making it right. By faith, we discern the future of this congregation and our stewardship of this physical campus. By faith, we step into Monday and a new school year and the uncertainties of a year to come. By faith, we step out into the unknown, guided by a hand just beyond our grasp.

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