

Faith to See

Hebrews 11:1-3, 11:8-14

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Continuing in our year-long series of sermons on calling, we have come to the call of faith. Faith calls you to live in an unfinished story that began long before you arrived and will continue long after you are gone.

We sometimes hear people speak of faith as if it were a possession. "Do you have faith?" they ask us. "Keep the faith," they encourage, "because the last thing you ever want to do is to lose your faith." But this language is foreign to the Bible. Faith isn't something that we get. It's something that gets us. We don't possess it. We are possessed by it.

It's analogous to another of the Bible's favorite words, which is love. We don't actually say, "I have love for you." We say, "I'm in love with you." It is a way of saying that the love has grabbed hold of me, taken over me, overwhelmed me. My life isn't my own anymore. That is how we should think about faith. It grabs hold of us, and changes everything about us. Our lives aren't our own anymore. Faith emerges not because we have argued ourselves into believing or because we have found the courage to take a leap of faith. Faith is not primarily a matter of the intellect or emotion, but will. It is a choice to believe, that is made for the same reason people choose to love. You get smitten by it! Faith is a grace from God - a grace that changes everything about your vision of life in this world.

Faith is a means of seeing that the great story of God's love for this world, a story that finds its most decisive chapter in the person of Jesus Christ, is a story into which your life has now been included. By faith, you come to see that Jesus isn't a part of your life. You are part of his life. This gives your life an eternal purpose. Your life isn't just the sum of your years, and it certainly isn't reduced to all your work, commuting, laundry, and visits to the doctor's office. No, your life is a vital part of God's historic drama with the church in the world.

Every Sunday when we stand in front of the world and say the Apostle's Creed, we are doing something that is so strange and unusual today. We are each saying that our beliefs did not originate in our hearts. We are saying that our beliefs were written by other people centuries ago. It's not your creed that we say in the church. We don't all stand up in church and recite our personal mission statements. No, we affirm the great faith of God's people, which is stronger than the faith of any one of us.

This is a great comfort to me. Because there are some days when my faith isn't so strong. Some days I have as much unbelief as belief in my heart. On those days I lean into the faith of God's people, and I remind myself that Christ is too big to fit in my heart. Thank God for that. Thank God that there is more to Jesus Christ than I know. For when my faith is crippled by fear or confusion, I am cast upon the sturdy great faith of the historic church.

This is the great faith that has been paid for in the blood of martyrs, hammered out by the great ecumenical councils, and crystallized by the world's greatest philosophers and theologians. This great faith has inspired the best of our social reformers to make wonderful changes in the world, and it has nurtured hope in the hearts of the oppressed for thousands of years. That is the faith that grabs hold of our lives, and carries us when our little personal faith wavers. When we take our place in this great historic community of faith, a community that goes back to the beginning of Genesis, we remember who we are and whose we are, why we are here and where we are heading.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews, one of the greatest affirmations of faith in the Bible, introduces us to some of the heroes of faith who have gone before us. By faith Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses and the people who passed through the Red Sea, Rahab, Gideon, Barach, Samson, David, and the prophets all spent their lives believing in a great hope. Each inherited the hope from those who went before.

According to verse ten, that hope was to make it to ³a city that has foundations whose architect and

builder is God.² That hope molded and shaped their lives. It filled their lives with an incredible dream. By faith, they left everything on a journey to find that City of God. But as we are told in verse thirteen, "All these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them."

Their faith, their dream outlived them. That is a wonderful thing. God saves us from small dreams that are easily accomplished. St. Augustine reminds us that nothing worth doing can be accomplished in one lifetime. In his philosophy of history, called *The City of God*, Augustine claims that the cities of earth, marred by greed and injustice, have always been in conflict with the peaceful and just City of God. But God will build his city. And the mission of those who live by faith is to throw their lives into participating in his construction of it. But the dream of seeing this great city completed has outlived all of them.

To the list of names given to us by the author of Hebrews, we could add the names of the great apostles: Paul, Peter, Barnabas, and Philip. When they died, we were still a long way from the City of God. It wasn't even clear to them how the church would survive, but they still spent their lives serving it. So could we add the names of the great theologians: Augustine, Bernard, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin. They all spent their lives trying to understand and bridge the gap between the cities of earth and God's City, but they didn't finish the work. So could we add the names of the great social reformers of our country: Frederick Douglas, Lucretia Mott, Martin Luther King, Jr. All of them committed their lives to a dream that outlived them.

Now we come to your name. History has made these other names great, but they were ordinary people born with less opportunity than you have. The thing that made these people great is not that they worked hard or set lofty goals for themselves, but that they got seized by the great faith of God's people and discovered a vision of a new city. In heaven they have been joined by other great saints that history has forgotten, but God hasn't. These are ordinary people like you and me, who did extraordinary things with life: parents who made heroic sacrifices for children, business people who chose to be ethical, teachers who knocked themselves out year after year to inspire students with great visions, public servants who refused to fight for a bigger piece of the pie and who labored to bring us closer to God's city.

In the words of Hebrews 11:1, they all had a conviction of things not seen. That is what defines a leader - the - ability to see what isn't here yet. Why do parents knock themselves out to raise children? Because they have a vision of this child as a healthy adult. Why do political leaders spend their lives trying to make a difference? Because one look at the newspapers makes it clear that we are far from the City of God.

That is what faith does. It isn't something that helps us cope better with our stressful lives. In fact, faith will add stress to your life as it forces you to deal with obstacles that stand between you and our great hope. If you want stress-free living, you don't want faith. Because faith will put you to work. If you want stress-free living, go buy the little bungalow at the golf resort. But if you want your life to make a difference, then do not resist the Holy Spirit who is constantly offering you opportunities to participate in the life and work of Jesus Christ in this world.

Like Jesus Christ, those who live by faith will find that their lives are constantly on the move. As you read through the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, it is clear that faith is almost synonymous with an insistence on continuing to move. "By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place he was to receive." Everybody in Scripture, and in history, who lives by faith sets out toward God's city and never stops moving. In his commentary on Hebrews, John Calvin said that faith is a matter of "leaving what is in one's hand to go seeking what is far off and unknown to us." That doesn't necessarily mean that you must physically move. It means that faith is constantly propelling your life to know more of God who at times seems far off and unknown. It means you have to keep growing. It means faith isn't a body of theological information you learn. Rather it is a journey to grow closer to God.

The closer the Holy Spirit brings you to God, the more you are motivated by hope. Because by faith you start to see that God is not far off, but near. By faith, you see that it is actually God who is building his city on earth, and that God has a calling for you in his holy architecture. If God is near, and God is at work, then you have every reason to be hopeful in your calling.

Thornton Wilder has written, "Hope may be a projection of the imagination, but so is despair. Despair all

too readily embraces the ills it foresees; hope is an energy that arouses the mind to explore every possibility to combat them. . . . Hope tries every door."

Try every door! It's not your job to force them open. That is God's job. Your calling is to live by faith, and to never assume the next door will be locked.

O God, our lives are so short. After a few fleeting moments, our years are done. So give us the faith to see that they can be used for holy dreams that will outlive us. Keep us moving until at last the building of your city on earth is done. Amen.