

We will be reading from the book of the Bible called the Letter to the Hebrews. One way to understand this letter is that it is a sermon written to a group of Christians to stay strong in the midst of hardship. We don't know who wrote Hebrews. There are lots of guesses about who wrote it but we don't know.

What we do know is that it is written to a group of Christians who have been thrown in prison, they have had their possessions taken, and most of them had faced hostility, ridicule and shame simply because following Jesus set them at odds with their culture. Because life had become so difficult, some had begun to avoid worship and others had decided to give up on trying to follow Jesus.

So this letter or sermon is an attempt to encourage these Christians in the face of a very difficult life.

As we begin to read this portion of the letter, let me say that many folks assume that trying to follow Christ means that life gets easier. It doesn't. And Hebrews is written to a group of Christians who are discovering that following Christ is getting pretty hard. Very hard. And they are getting discouraged.

If you have ever found yourself discouraged in your Christian faith then you may be able to relate to these words which we are about to read. If you find yourself struggling with whether or not the Christian faith should be important to you, then these words may be written to you as well.

If you find yourself ever getting discouraged and having decided that being a part of a church is more of a pain than it is a benefit, then these words may speak to you as well. If you find yourself wondering if God has a plan and purpose for you then these words may speak to you as well.

Read Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

The Greek word for faith is “pistis.” I saw that word with caution. Maybe we need a new phrase in our English vocabulary. “I’m pistised.” Meaning I have faith. That would look good on a t-shirt. It would get people asking you what it means.

Paul used “pistis” a lot in his writings. Although in Greek mythology pistis was one of the spirits who escaped Pandora’s box and fled back to heaven and abandoned humanity. Interesting isn’t it. Faith is one of those things in Greek mythology that abandoned humanity. In Greek mythology, humans lost the ability to have faith.

Hebrews is written to a group of Christians who were facing some pretty rough times and they were wondering why Christ had not returned to rescue them for their trials and tribulations. We all know what it is like to pray for God for something to happen and wonder why God seems silent to our prayers. We all know what it is like to face difficult times and wonder where God is during the difficulty.

We also know about what it means to seek to follow God but we can’t figure out where God is leading us. We face something difficult, we encounter something in our life that doesn’t make sense, we struggle to have faith because our life is not going in a direction that makes sense. Sometimes we feel like we are hanging in mid-air at the end of a rope and we have no idea what the rope is attached to.

The people that this sermon is addressed to understand all of those feelings of bewilderment. And so the author attempts to address their struggles by reminding them of some people from their past who also faced some pretty difficult times. The author lists several folks including Enoch who trusted in God as well as Noah who built an ark on dry ground. But the main characters that the author lifts up are the characters of Abraham and Sarah.

Frederick Buechner sums up well the faith of Abraham and Sarah when he writes this:

*When God told Abraham, who was a hundred at the time, that at the age of ninety his wife, Sarah, was finally going to have a baby, Abraham came close to knocking himself out—"fell on his face and laughed," as Genesis puts it (17:17). In another version of the story (18:8ff.), Sarah is hiding behind the door eavesdropping, and here it's Sarah herself who nearly splits a gut— although when God asks her about it afterward, she denies it. "No, but you did laugh," God says, thus having the last word as well as the first. God doesn't seem to hold their outbursts against them, however. On the contrary, God tells them the baby's going to be a boy and they are to name him Isaac. Isaac in Hebrew means "laughter."*

*Why did the two old crocks laugh? They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true, they would really have something to laugh about, and in the meanwhile it helped keep them going.*

*Faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," says the Letter to the Hebrews (11:1). Faith is laughter at the promise of a child called Laughter.*

*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.*

*I have faith that my friend is my friend. It is possible that all his motives are ulterior. It is possible that what he is secretly drawn to is not me, but my wife or my money. But there's something about the way I feel when he's around, about the way he looks me in the eye, about the way we can talk to each other without pretense and be silent together without embarrassment, that makes me willing to put my life in his hands, as I do each time I call him friend.*

*I can't prove the friendship of my friend. When I experience it, I don't need to prove it. When I don't experience it, no proof will do. If I tried to put his friendship to the test somehow, the test itself would queer the friendship I was testing. So it is with the Godness of God.*

Is faith important? The author of Hebrews seems to be saying that faith makes visible that which is invisible. One way to think about faith is this way. God is active and alive in the world. But faith in God allows us to see what God is doing.

Have you ever been given a picture and told that there is a secret message in the picture. You can't see it. But then you are given 3-D glasses and you see what is the secret message. The glasses reveal a hidden treasure in the picture that we would not be able to see except for the use of the glasses.

Having faith in God and trusting in God's presence allows us to see things that we could not see otherwise. If you are like me, there are times in your life when it is hard to see the presence of God. But then there are other times when we see amazing things happen and we think to ourselves, "yes, there really is a God and God has a plan for my life."

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" according to the writer of Hebrews. It is not easy to have faith many times. Many times we do want to give up. But helping to encourage one another to be faithful is one very important reason why the church exists.

I would even say that it might be the most important reason why we gather with other Christians on a regular basis. We gather with one another to encourage one another to be strong in faith and to grow in faith. The author of Hebrews lifts up past examples like Noah and Abraham and Sarah.

Maybe you have some of your own examples of people who maintained faith in the midst of difficult obstacles. Maybe it was a parent who taught you to maintain faith in God when you found out later that they had just lost their job.

Maybe it was a friend who modeled faith to you when they faced an extreme crisis in their life. Maybe it was a teacher who taught you much more than reading or writing or arithmetic. Maybe it was a public figure who walked the walk instead of doing much talking the talk.

Today is a day when we can lift up and celebrate the people who have modeled for us what faith in God is all about. Today is also a day when we seek to encourage one another to grow stronger in the faith.

Mark Twain said it through Huck Finn: "Faith is believin' what you know ain't so."

May we all learn to grow stronger into believing what may appear right now to not be so. AMEN.

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-Given: August 18, 2013 in Allison Creek res. (York, SC)