



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
 Asheville, North Carolina  
 7 August 2022  
 Sermon: By Faith  
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

### Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 (NRSV)

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 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.

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. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

As you are able and as it is comfortable, please rest your back against your seat. Put both feet on the floor. If it is not too distracting, close your eyes and put your hand over your heart. Start to pay attention to your breath. In and out. In and out. Feel your heart pulse against the palm of your hand. You may feel your pulse slow as you breath deeper.

What do you need to let go of, to be fully in this time of worship?  
 What plans, or worries and concerns do you need to lay to the side to be fully here?  
 Can you let go of what came before worship, what you need to do after, just for this moment? Breath in and out.

And as you breath, I want you to repeat something to yourself, in your head.

Breath in: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for"

Breath out: "The conviction of things not seen"

Breath in: "The assurance of things hoped for"

Breath out: "The conviction of things not seen"

Breath in: "The assurance of things hoped for"

Breath out: "The conviction of things not seen"

As you open your eyes, reflect on what you felt.

Did you trust that in this moment, you are loved and you are enough?

Did you trust, in this moment, that all you needed was to be present, to be here?

Did you trust that this community, surrounding you, was trustworthy?

That this community was enough to support and hold you in this moment?

In the book of Hebrews, faith is a disposition; it is an attitude of love and trust, rooted in the faith Christ displayed in his life and in his connection to God:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession (4:14).

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered (6:19 & 20).

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful (10:23).

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 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 (11:1-3).

Grace Covenant do you feel it, this steadfast hope, burning in our hearts?

For the longest time, I got faith wrong. I confused it with belief. I thought faith was something I held in my mind, a cognitive agreement with a set of statements:

The existence of God  
 The divinity of Christ  
 The resurrection of the dead  
 The life everlasting

And while belief is a central part of the Christian life, it can be fleeting; it changes over time; it is secondary to something more foundational: faith as a disposition, an assurance; faith as something that you feel much more in your heart than what you hold in your head.

“The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Last month, I read Richard Power’s stunning and heartbreaking novel *Bewilderment*. In it, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader named Robin is a passionate and creative child, deeply beset by grief from the sudden loss of his mother to a car accident. In his grief, Robin becomes prone to fits of rage. With his world turned upside down, he becomes unable to tolerate the daily trials of life. He tears his room apart in a fury. He slams his best friend in the face. His school threatens expulsion and pressures his father to seek psychiatric treatment and medication for his son.

In his desperation, Robin’s father enrolls his son in a clinical trial. You see, before her sudden death, Robin’s mother had worked with a lab performing studies on human emotions. They had mapped her feelings using a neurofeedback machine that had recorded what was happening in her mind when she experienced joy.

And after her death, the lab saved that map. They could say, this is what her brain and her body were doing when she experienced joy. So, in the trial, they hooked Robin up to the neurofeedback machine. They could measure his emotions, and when he moved the needle up to joy, they could tell him when what he felt

approximated what his mother felt when she experienced joy. Slowly, through months of training, Robin feels his own mother's presence through her joy. Her joy is handed down to him, and it soothes his grief, his yearning, his rage. It fills, however partially, the gap left from her loss.

Whose joy do you carry in your own heart? Can you picture it, in your mind's eye, the joy, the love, the embrace of a parent or companion, an ancestor, a mentor, your chosen family? Who is that for you?

Because this is the thing about faith: it comes to us as sheer gift of the Holy Spirit, but that Holy Spirit chooses to work through community and our ancestors of the faith:

- The trust that you carry that reminds you that you are a beloved child of a gracious God;
- The courage that you hold to continue in the work of justice in the name of a liberating God;
- The strength that fuels your hope even under the weight of grief and seemingly insurmountable histories and systems of sin and oppression –

These are the gifts of faith, forged by the Spirit, and shared by the people in our lives who show us what it means to live lives of trust, courage, and strength.

Never forget that this is a gift we are given, *and it is a gift that we share, that we pass on to others*. Because when my faith is weak, the faithfulness of others carries me and supports me. And when your faith falters, the community is here, to pray and to worship with and beside you, to support you, for as long as you need.

And others will discover the gifts of faith in themselves by the faith they see in us, by what they see in you. This is how we become part of the story of faith.

Hebrews 11

v.4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's

v. 7 By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark

v. 8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive

v. 28 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land

And also, by faith Grace Covenant gathered, in person and online, in the third year of the pandemic.

By faith Grace Covenant cared for one another, and prayed for one another, and supported one another, and held on to one another in a culture that tells us life is only about competition and consumption.

By faith Grace Covenant learned together to tell the truth, the truth about all the ways our community, and churches like ours, have excluded and marginalized and oppressed.

By faith Grace Covenant sought to live in a new way together, however partially, following the savior who proclaimed love and liberation.

And by faith Grace Covenant proclaimed again and again the God whose love is greater than we can imagine, whose welcome is bigger than we can fathom.

As imperfect but nonetheless beloved people of God, our faith becomes part of God's greater story.

The Spirit is present in our faith, and uses our faith, for the love and liberating works of God.

Do you feel it?

Breath in: "The assurance of things hoped for"

Breath out: "The conviction of things not [yet] seen"

Thanks be to God.