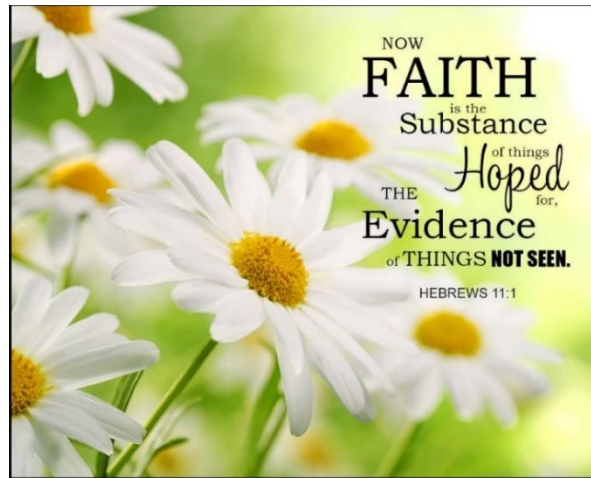


Sermon – August 7, 2022
“The Assurance of Things Hoped For”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill us with open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people that transforms us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here right now. Amen

Good morning! Thanks to Matt and Brian for coming and sharing with us this morning about the Gideons and for the opportunity for us to be a part of that ministry. I would like to encourage us to support giving Bibles through the Gideons. I want to lead by example and plan to give enough funds to send a Bible for each year that Kay and I have been married. Let me encourage each of us to identify a regular anniversary and send a Bible on that date. This is not a contest to see who sends the most. Just identify a yearly event that we can remember and give, helping to make the Word of God available to others. If we send one Bible on that date, that is one more Bible going out into the world to be placed in someone's hand. The anniversary becomes a reminder that helps us to remember to give our gift. So, pick out an anniversary and give a Bible.

Let's talk this morning about faith. What is faith? Has anyone ever told us we need more faith? Do we want to grow in our faith? What does it mean to have faith in Jesus, in God? Do we know what faith is?

Let's start with some physical examples. For example, I have faith the sun will come up tomorrow. I am not concerned it will set this evening and not come back up tomorrow morning. I know the sun will be there when the part of the earth I am on turns to face the sun again tomorrow morning. I also have faith that the stars will be visible on clear nights. I am able to see these physical items and have faith that they will not go away. Related to physical things, I can see and I have faith that there are equal and opposite reactions to the forces I apply. There are also learned or experiential faith development lessons that I have learned by experiences. I have faith that rusty bolts result in busted knuckles. I also have a learned faith that bees never do what you expect them to do. So, I have faith that every time I open a beehive, I will find something unexpected. Another kind of faith I have had is the faith of a child. I was blessed that as a child I had faith that I would wake up in the morning and still be in our home with my family, and I was blessed with that gift until I left home to be on my own. I know that not every child has the opportunity to develop that faith, but it is another kind of faith I have experienced.

As believers we are to have faith in Jesus, that through his death, resurrection and ascension we are reconciled to God. When we believe in Jesus and trust him for our salvation, we come to faith in Jesus. What is faith? I am always on the lookout as I read for definitions of faith. The most recent definition I have found was written by J.D. Walt. His version is "Faith means action in light of a new reality." I have that faith definition written down in my journal for reflection. In chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews, the opening verses provide two definitions of faith, the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. The word assurance here is used to help us understand that there is firmness and great confidence that we can be owners of what we hope for. Assurance is not a loose or a maybe outcome, but a firm, solid grasp of the promises we have been given in Christ. The second definition has more of an active or life-filled certainty that compels us to reach out without fear and take hold of the unseen realities that are ours in Jesus Christ. This is not faith with a quiet, hesitant glance but an active, confident, gripping in faith of the promises we have in Jesus.

This morning let's look at the example of Abraham and see what we can learn about living in faith from him. The first thing we might notice about Abraham's faith is that when God calls him to leave his home and go to the land of Canaan, Abraham obeys. Obedience and faith go together. When we are called into the service of Jesus, we are to obey that call. Obedience is not a distant, I-will-get-around-to-it response, but a full-self, pack-up-everything-and-get-going-

now response. Abraham does just this. He is called by God to go and he acts, packing up and going even though he did not yet have ownership of the place he was to go and even though he did not know where he was going. The point is that we should expect faith to have a degree of obedience to it, our obedience to God's call.

The next example of faith we find through Abraham is that he stays for a time in the land he has been promised, even though he has not been given any of the land. Abraham actually lives in tents in the land of Canaan, the land God promised him. Living in tents means he is one who is visiting and not a permanent resident. There is no house built in the land by Abraham, yet he stays there. Notice that not only Abraham does this, but also Isaac his son and Jacob, Isaac's son. Abraham is said to have looked forward to the city that has God as its architect and builder. They are all hoping for something better. If we are to exhibit this aspect of faith, then we will also need to realize that we are those who are looking forward to a better place, a city not made by human hands but one built by God. Abraham and his son and grandson are said to have confessed that they were strangers and foreigners in the place of promise. They were pilgrims on a journey, living in a land that is not yet their home. We also should have this aspect of faith in our lives. We should be those who are strangers and foreigners in this land and are looking forward, taking hold of the promise of a better place, a city prepared for us by God. Let's see if we can grow our understanding of faith in a manner that helps us to grow in faith in Jesus.

Let's start with the idea that faith is a confident action. This is where we see Abraham pack up and move to the Promised Land when God calls. Confident action is putting our faith into motion, moving off to follow God's direction and living into the promises we are given, not tentatively, but confidently. J.D. Walt's definition of faith, "Faith means action in light of a new reality," fits here. As the new reality of Jesus comes into our lives, we move out into the promises with faith in action in our lives, and hopefully we move into the lives of those we encounter in the world bringing the love of Jesus to them.

Faith is also action taken to move into those promises even if the source of those promises is unseen. We are not to wait until we find a visible physical connection to God before we move out into action in faith. We worship an unseen God, and Jesus is currently seated in heaven with God. We have Holy Spirit present with us and are connected to Jesus spiritually, but physical sight is yet to come. We are believers who move, work, love, and live in the in-breaking kingdom in action while God is yet unseen.

We also need to understand that faith works extraordinary miracles in the lives of ordinary people. We do not have to be a super Christian for faith to be effective. Great faith is present in the lives of ordinary people. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were people who also struggled with life, yet were used by God. The Bible is filled with examples of ordinary people who through faith and action were used by God. We also can be used by God in His perfect work even if we are not yet perfect. We are to be those who move out in faith as pilgrims who are on a journey to a better place, who live in the world and grow in faith as we journey in faith.

We also need to keep in mind that faith works in many different situations. Noah built an ark, Abraham traveled and lived in a tent, Joseph was taken in slavery to Egypt, and whatever our situation is, faith can and will work there. Faith is not dependent on our situation. It depends on our heart and our willingness to live into God's promises wherever we are called.

Finally, and this is a difficult aspect of faith, faith may have a variety of outcomes. We in the West are very focused on faith that results in material blessings. However, a quick look at the story of Cain and Abel does not support this approach to faith. Abel is still murdered in spite of his faith. Persecution is growing across the world among our brothers and sisters in Christ, and conflict within our own culture over religious freedom continues to grow. This aspect of faith is not a faith-equals-good-in-this-life approach, but the reality that we may not see the results of our faith in the form of blessings in this life. For some, those blessings only come in the city of God. But receiving blessings from God is the final point. Faith is rewarded by God. A Christ follower's reward is to hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Earlier in Hebrews, Jesus' role was emphasized as the change agent or new reality. Jesus accomplishes this by suffering and dying in our place on the cross. Jesus's resurrection points clearly to this new reality. There is more than death awaiting us. There is a city of God where there is no more pain, no more suffering, and our tears are wiped away by God. Jesus has transformed everything. He is the new reality. It is in Jesus that we place our faith, and we trust that Jesus fulfills the promises of God. In light of this new reality, we are to think of ourselves as pilgrims, living in a temporary place, whose hearts yearn for the city God has prepared for us. Pilgrims do not pack their belongings and wait for a future time to move. They pack up and begin their journey with Jesus to a new place. We also may die in faith as did Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but we are to move out in faith to love those who do not yet embrace these promises. We are to be those who have already gone forth from their homes and are now living as strangers

and foreigners while waiting in action for the fulfillment of the promises of God. Seek to open our hearts this morning to faith in action and begin by coming and joining with Jesus in the breaking of the bread as we commune with him in this place by faith, and then rise up and go forth into the world to join with Jesus in his mission to all people.

Pray with me: Jesus, we also desire to be ordinary people who are acting in faith to be part of your perfect plan for the world. Open us to obedient action in light of the new reality you gave us on the cross. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

PRAYER TO HOLY SPIRIT

Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy.

Act in me, O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy.

Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is holy.

Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy.

Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy.

Saint Augustine (A.D. 354-430)