

Sermon – 08/18/19

Text – Hebrews 11:17-31; 12:1-3

Theme – “By Faith”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week’s Epistle lesson (the verses just before today’s text) began with these words: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That is very important for us to keep in mind. Faith is the assurance of things *hoped for* – not things that we already possess. Faith is the conviction of things *not seen* – not things that we can prove. Faith is a very elusive thing. Something that fights against odds. Something that cries out “yes” when everything around us says “no”. Something that believes, even when it seems impossible or when logic would dictate the opposite.

Last week’s reading then went on to give a number of Old Testament examples of faith, starting with creation itself. From there it proceeded to Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Isaac. All these are excellent examples of faith. After all, we cannot prove creation (no more than today’s science can prove its pet theories of how the universe and life began). No, we simply believe that God created, as He tells us in His Word. That is, He spoke and it was. That He made Adam from the dust of the ground, with His own almighty hand. That He formed Eve from a rib taken from Adam’s side. Now, to modern thinking, this is all very laughable. Yet we believe.

Or take Abel. What an example of faith! He was the second son of Adam and Eve. But they were convinced that Cain (the first-born) was the one who would save them, and so when Abel was born they gave him that name that means “superfluous” or “pointless” or “unnecessary”. It comes from the same Hebrew root from which we heard Solomon speak a few weeks ago when he wrote “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”. *That* is how father Adam and mother Eve saw Abel! And yet **Abel** is the one who trusts God and His promise of a Savior, not precious and spoiled and treasured Cain. It was Abel’s sacrifice which was accepted by God, because his was offered in faith. And because of that faith, he was hated – and eventually murdered in cold blood – by his dear brother Cain. Yet that faith has given Abel eternal life.

Moving forward, we come upon Noah. The last and only true believer on the face of the earth. The one who found favor with God because of that faith, that trust, in God’s promise of a Savior. For year after year, Noah labored on his ark – and while he did so, he pleaded and called his neighbors to repent. But they did not listen. And so they all died in the Flood, while Noah and his family (eight souls in all, as our baptismal prayer puts it) lived. By faith.

Centuries later we meet Abraham and his wife Sarah. When God first calls him, Abraham is a worshipper of idols, living far to the east of the Holy Land. An old man already at the time (about 75 years old), Abraham and Sarah (who was about 10 years younger) have no children. But God calls Abraham to leave his family, his home, his business, his homeland, his idols behind – to go where the Lord will lead him. And God promises that He will give Abraham and his descendants the land into which He is taking them – that it will be from this line of Abraham that the Savior will come. And, miraculously, Abraham believes! Yet it is more than a decade before that son will finally be born. What faith Abraham – and Sarah – had, to believe that God would do the impossible for them!

Their son Isaac likewise had to live by faith. Abraham never did own any of the promised Holy Land – except for the tiny parcel in which he buried his beloved Sarah. And neither did Isaac. His whole long life, Isaac was a wandering shepherd. Yet he believed God's promises, even though he never saw them fulfilled in his lifetime. And Jacob, Isaac's son – how his faith was tested! First by the constant competition with his brother Esau over which of them would get the birth-right. Then, after he tricked father Jacob into giving it to him, as he had to flee Esau's wrath and promised vengeance. Then 14 years living with his uncle Laban, who gave Jacob a taste of his own medicine, trying to trick and deceive and steal from his own nephew. Yet through it all, Jacob and his faith triumphed.

All these people, these men and women of God, these great saints, all of them lived by faith. As our lesson makes clear, they heard (and believed) God's promises to them. Yet they never did see them completely fulfilled and finalized during their lifetimes. And, remember, many of them lived to be quite old! How hard it must have been to trust, when even your father and mother think you are nothing. When literally everyone around you laughs and denies when you tell them what God has said. When God tells you to leave everything and blindly follow. When He says that you will be a mother, even though you are pushing 100. When your two sons are scheming against each other, at the other's throat, trying to get the inheritance. When you are on the run, your own brother hot for your blood, without a friend in the world.

It is the same with those mentioned in today's reading. How great a test of faith do you think it was for Abraham when he was called by God to offer up his only son Isaac as a sacrifice? But Isaac is it; he is the whole hope for a Savior. And now God says to kill him? Or what about Isaac? Surely by the time his dad ties him up and lays him on an altar, the light must have begun to go on in his mind. When he sees the knife lifted and about to fall. Yet he too believes.

Or Jacob, now a very old man, living in far-off Egypt where his beloved son Joseph is Pharaoh's right-hand man. But this is NOT where God said His people would live. Yet Jacob is content to go there and, before he dies, he blesses his sons – and makes them promise they will carry his bones back to the Promised Land. For he is certain they will be returning there some day.

And Moses – imagine the testing of his parents' faith when they hear the decree to kill all male Hebrew babies! So they make a little boat of reeds and tar, and float their darling son out alone on the Nile – a river infested with crocodiles – with only his sister to watch over him. And later, as he grew, think of the faith in God's promises it took for Moses to side with the Hebrew slaves instead of the rich and powerful Egyptians who had adopted him. But he threw it all away because he trusted God's Word.

Faith. Truly it IS an amazing thing. But what, really, is faith? Well, obviously, faith is believing or trusting. But is the mere act of faith what matters? Clearly, that cannot be the case since everyone has faith in something. A Muslim has faith in Allah. The devil-worshipper has faith in Satan. Even those who deny the existence of God (or any god) have faith of a sort -- though it is a faith that there is NO deity. Modern man puts his faith, oftentimes, in science or money or government or education. But, the fact is, everyone has faith in SOMETHING.

No, faith itself saves no one. Rather it is the object of that faith which matters. Now, for us Christians, our faith is in the God revealed to us in the Bible. The Father, Son, Holy Spirit -- three Persons and yet one God. The One who created all things. The One who loved us, despite our sin, and came down from heaven to take our place in keeping the demands of the Law, in

dying our death, in suffering our hell -- the One who lived for us and died for us -- the One who defeated our great enemies of sin/death/devil -- the One who rose on Easter and opened heaven to those who trust in Him. The One who gives us that faith as the saving Gospel is given and applied to us in Word and Sacrament. The One who keeps us in that faith by that same Gospel. Our faith is in Him. And Him alone. Not our works. Not our offerings. Not our love, for God or man. No, our faith is always and only in Him and His love for us.

That is the same place in which those Old Testament saints mentioned earlier had their hope and faith. Abel was nothing -- so his parents taught him, even by his very name. But because he was nothing, Abel put his entire hope in God and His promised Savior. And it was that faith in God's promised salvation that made Abel acceptable.

Noah was all alone, one man standing against the tide of wickedness and sin and rejection of God flooding the whole world. Yet he lived simply because he believed God and looked to Him alone for life -- from the threatened deluge, and in the world to come by the saving work of the Messiah to come.

Abraham had to leave everything behind, exchanging civilization and comfort for the desolate barrenness of the Canaanite wilderness. A rich man who owned nothing. The promised father of countless multitudes who had no children. An old man with an old wife. Yet he believed this impossible promise. And when he and Sarah finally DID have that son, Abraham believed when God told him to sacrifice Isaac -- Abraham tells the servants that he and the boy will return from the altar. They lived because they knew their God was the One who makes the dead alive again.

So too with all the Old Testament saints. And all the New Testament believers. And with you and me. We live -- by faith. Like those men and women mentioned in our lesson, we too face a hostile world. Oh, I doubt that any of us have it as difficult as Abel or Noah or Abraham or these others. We have not had to face what St. Paul or St. Peter dealt with in their lives -- and deaths due to their faith. But we too have our struggles and challenges. Satan comes after us too, in our own ways. He will use anything and everything against us. Health crises. Family disturbances and strife. Subtle persecution and ridicule. Depression and loneliness. The list goes on and on. Whatever he can find, he will use. He will marshal his forces against us. He will attack us and harass us. He will never stop. To the point that we are tempted to lose faith.

That is when we need to remember the object of our faith -- our loving and saving God. To remember all that He has done for us. And all He promises to yet do. To remember that this world, this life, is NOT the goal, the fulfillment, the reward He has in store for us.

And, when assaulted and buffeted by the devil, to keep in mind the closing words of our lesson today:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the Founder and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

**You** live by faith. Faith in Jesus Christ. The Author of life, who gave His life to win your eternal life. The Perfecter of life, who was perfect for you so that you may receive credit for that perfection, and to give you a perfect life.

Not that you have all of it now. You don't. You can't -- because you still live in a sinful and fallen world. And you still have your sinful and fallen nature clinging to you. But you WILL have that perfect life. That is God's promise to you. When we leave this present world, we leave behind all of sin's effects. Gone are the pain and suffering. Gone are crime and disease and violence. Gone are hatred and persecution. Gone are sin and death and the devil. On the Last Day, God will raise our bodies, new and perfect and whole. And joined together with our souls again, we will live forever in the restored perfections of the new heaven and earth He promises us.

That is where we have our true citizenship, as the Bible says. That is the life God wants and intends us to enjoy, forever with Him and all the saint and angels. His children, ruling alongside their loving Father.

That was God's promise to Adam and Eve, when He came to them after the Fall. That was the promise Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest trusted. That is the promise He has made to us -- and sealed with the blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ. You know that promise. You trust that promise. By that faith YOU live. Now and forever. Even if it seems impossible at times. Because you know your God does -- and delights in doing -- the impossible. In making dead dust into a living man. In calling the insignificant and despised and unwanted to be His own. In making the old and barren fruitful. In freeing from the death of slavery. In defeating death by dying. In opening heaven to sinners.

You are God's forgiven child. You have eternal life. You have triumphed over sin/death/devil. All things are yours. You will rule heaven and earth. So God has promised. Live by faith in those promises. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.