

What is Faith

Genesis 15:1-6 Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-12

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” These words from the Book of Hebrews give us the first clue about this thing called, “faith.” It tells us that faith is a bridge between the seen and the unseen - what we can experience with our human sight and what we cannot. I have faith that the sun still exists even in the midst of all these clouds. But it is not only things that are just “out of sight,” I also have faith that there is more to the world than I can see - there are powers and forces that live beyond the realm of my senses. Faith is different from fact because it cannot be proved or disproved. With faith there is always the possibility of being wrong. “Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is theoretically possible.” wrote William James. For faith to be in play, there must be room for doubt.

A second aspect of faith has to do with its element of trust. Our Genesis reading has God tell Abram, *This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.* God brought Abram outside and said, *“Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.”* And Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Faith is also connects time. With faith we can move from the current situation to a future hope. And it is more than a belief or an idea it is a matter of trust and thus affects how we live. How do we know Abram had faith, because he lived his life going where he sensed God told him to go and did what God told him to do. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr tells us faith of necessity involves action: “Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.” So faith is not only an idea, but it is a motivator, something that guides us, to literally move our feet in a direction even when we can't see where we are going or what the outcome will be.

But often as we take that first or second or 15th step forward, the path does become clearer and the direction more exact. On our sign board this week has been a quote from one of my favorite authors, Madeline L'Engle who said, “Some things have to be believed to be seen.” Sometimes faith is what opens our eyes to see how

God is moving, how the pieces are fitting together. Not always, and sometimes it takes a very long time to see the whole picture, but our faith can make the path ahead clearer.

There are some attributes that are incorrectly assigned to faith in our culture. I am glad Abram is our example of faith, because Abram was not perfect by any means. He tried to pass off his wife as his sister when they were once in danger. He and Sarai tried to solve the heir problem themselves with Hagar and Ishmael which leads to some rough stuff. Faith does not mean that we become perfect or that we will not have “failures.” Sometimes huge failures.

We humans do our best. We sometimes think we know what will work but our endeavors don't turn out as we plan. Sometimes we think we know what God wants us to do but those things don't go as we plan either. All churches, including Faith have had projects that were done with great faith and effort, but did not produce the hoped for outcome. We must remember that we are imperfect beings, and like with Abram and Sarai and Hagar and Ishmael, God can take our wrong efforts done in faith and even make them into something good.

Faith does not guarantee that our prayers will be answered as we want them to be. Jesus, Paul, and many others pray that they be released from something, but their prayers are not answered in the way they hope, Jesus does not avoid the cross, Paul is not cured of his “thorn in the flesh” though we are not sure exactly what it is. There is a un-Biblical teaching out there that our lack of faith makes our prayers fail. No, sometimes what we pray for does not come to pass, we don't know why.

Nor does Faith promise a perfect life. Sometimes the road of Faith is difficult.

But Faith in God does mean we trust that no matter what happens, God's love does not fail us. This is the faith with which Jesus gathered with his disciples so many years ago for the passover feast. In faith we now bridge time and space to join them at this table. And here we receive a vision of the life of faith, and assurance of God's

great love for us to guide and direct and strengthen us no matter what is ahead of us on our journey.

"All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen." wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, 20th century

"Believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance, and have faith that in this love there is a strength and a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without having to step outside it."

Corrie ten Boom, 20th century

"Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."

Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-12

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.

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. 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. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 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. 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."