

Faith Sees Beyond the Horizon

Luke 17:20-27; Hebrews 11:1-12

This Sunday, we will have spent eleven months here in church looking at the book of Hebrews. So far, the author to the Hebrews has led us through a sometimes dizzying tour through Israel's history, stopping here and there to reacquaint us with the heroes of Israel's faith, stooping under the furniture and into the back corners of Israel's sanctuary, all with an eye toward seeing and understanding how Israel's long history all led toward our finding and knowing and loving Christ.

And last week, our author took us into the home stretch of this long, involved letter by proposing to us what I would consider a riddle. My own translation of Hebrews 11:1 would read something like this: "*Now faith is the substance of what is only hoped for, the proof of what cannot be seen.*" And the reason I consider this a riddle is that we normally don't think of hopes and dreams as very substantive. Nor are we typically impressed when we look for proof and someone offers us something we can't see at all. If you can't see it, what does it prove?

And the point of the riddle is that Christians, back when this letter was being written and I think today, are prone to want to practice a faith with an outcome that is tangibly, measurably better in the here and now than all that suffering and sacrifice and service Jesus taught we would have to live out. So Christians in the first century were constantly challenged and tempted by mystic rabbi's who wanted the early disciples to costume their faith in rituals and disciplines and over-wrought experiences.

They were told: "Pray like this, fast like this, give this much, worship like this and God will act and your lives will be better." So they were promised a better, brighter outcome here and now than they could get by simply being faithful to Christ and church. And it was dangerous, then and now, because it was, then and now, a distraction from that quieter, more substantial gospel that addresses issues of heart and character, that gospel that can only be learned in relationships defined by covenant and church, relationships in which people both tell the truth and then persevere when the truth is hard to hear and love is hard to express.

"Faith is the substance of what is only hoped for..." What does that look like? Last week, we heard the story of Abel, whose name means that he was only a breath. The second son of Adam and Eve, whose life was snuffed out by his older brother Cain because Abel made an offering at worship that evoked God's favor, but Cain's offering, probably equally big, equally extravagant, but nevertheless it did not please God.

The eldest son, the Crown Prince of the human community, it might have been the first time Cain had ever lost a contest! I'm guessing that Cain saw his whole bright future as humanity's reigning king irretrievably lost because God had favored his kid brother in a single act of worship. God himself spoke to Cain, offered him hope if he could turn around, warned him of

the danger he was in, but Cain couldn't pull out. He intended to be king, his brother was in the way and that is all that Cain could think about!

So Abel died, and ironically, by God's mercy, Cain survived and became, guess what, a king! The human community fractured after Abel's murder and some portion of Adam's sons and daughters tired of a gospel about heart and character and invisible promises and went over to Cain. So we read in Genesis 4 that the first human city was founded by Cain and that city became the home of the strongest and brightest of the human family, they built, they invented, they conquered and dominated, but all Abel did was make an offering that invoked God's favor and die.

Now who does that remind us of? It says, *"Faith is the substance of what is only hoped for, the proof of what cannot be seen."* In his day, Abel was Christ, not literally Jesus, but the visible picture, the tangible evidence that God had a plan to save humanity that had nothing to do with being strong and bright, a builder and a go getter. Last week, we read that *"by faith, though he is dead, [Abel] still speaks."* By faith! His offering pleased God because what he put in the plate, what he lay on the table, spoke of what was in his heart, which was a living breathing faith that if he trusted God, God would bear him even through death.

Our text goes on, *"And without faith, it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him."* The point being that Cain's focus was on Cain's destiny, while Abel understood that his destiny rested in where he stood with God, so he gave an offering that spoke of what was in his heart. Some millennia after Abel came a man named Enoch and all we learn about him in Genesis is that *"...he walked with God and he was not, for God took him."*

This is likely a Swing Low Sweet Chariot story like Elijah. These few sentences in Genesis about Enoch inspired a whole library of sacred fiction through the Old Testament centuries, some of which is quoted in the New Testament, but, for our purposes today, it is enough to say that, like Abel, Enoch was faithful in those dark centuries while the world spun in toward the Flood, that Enoch didn't live long, and, like Abel, what mattered about him was where he stood with God.

The theme continues with Noah. By the time Noah appears on the scene in Genesis 6, the Cainite civilization had run off the rails. Genesis informs us that the kings descended from Cain had taken to describing themselves as *"sons of God"* and *"giants"* and *"men of renown"*. The Bible on the other hand describes them as rapacious and violent and lawless and brutal to the point that the sort of mercy that Cain received from God millennia before was long since exhausted.

Noah, himself, was the last of a long line descended from a son of Adam named Seth, who had founded and set into motion a community of believers who had trailed down the centuries, likely harassed and hunted by the Cainite tyrants in whose shadows they had to live. God's promise to

Noah's father is that the dwindling community of believers would at last find "rest" through the ministry of his boy, who was something a good deal more complicated than just a shipwright and a sailor.

Noah was a prophet, and the Ark God gave him to build was God's message to anyone with eyes and ears in that last century before Cain's master race of tyrants and strongmen were swept away. It says in 1 Peter 3 that the Spirit of Christ was there in the ministry of Noah as the Ark went up in those last decades before the Flood. The point being that in those days Noah became something like Christ, not literally Jesus, but Noah was "...the substance of what was only hoped for, the proof of what could not be seen."

Noah was likely thought strange, living on the plains of Mesopotamia and erecting what must have looked like a giant sanctuary for some sort of sea going Deity miles away from any sort of sea. Now the gesture itself told a story if you had ears to hear and eyes to see and a heart to understand. And this is why we're told in Hebrews that "*By faith, [Noah] condemned the world,*" because Noah alone possessed enough faith to show "reverent fear" when God warned about a flood. After all, Noah built a ship!

So our passage this morning identifies Noah as "*an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*" The point being that sinners don't become righteous by showing any sort of special nobility or brilliance. We're made righteous when we believe God's warnings about judgment enough to be afraid and when we trust his promises enough to obey his commands. Noah spent decades building a ship on desert ground because he knew he was dealing with a God who makes no empty threats and no empty promises either.

And millennia later God found Abraham, on the same ground, a wealthy man, secure in one of the two greatest civilizations in his day. And God accosted Abraham with a command and a promise. "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you and I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and...in you all the families of the world will be blessed!*"

God said to Abraham, in so many words, "You're the man. I save the world through you!" And whatever experience Abraham had with God, it must have sold him, because in Genesis 12 the text goes on, "*And Abram went.*" But if Abram was expecting a brisk, straightline victory tour, God was going to disappoint him.

Nothing came easy for Abraham. Our passage in Hebrews tells us that "*Abraham lived in the land of promise as a stranger, as foreigners, he and Isaac and Jacob lived in tents.*" Three generations of green card status followed by four centuries of slavery in Egypt before much in the way of greatness began to attach to Abraham's name. Isaac, the child of promise, wasn't sent to Abraham and Sarah until years after both of them had given up and tried something else. And then the kid arrived.

Worn and tattered and bent and mildly fractured, their faith held on just long enough to see the promise begin to go in motion. Abraham and Sarah never saw it but our passage in Hebrews reports that God's promise to them about more children than stars in the sky and sand near the sea has long been fulfilled many times over, to the point that you and I and anyone today who believes in Christ can be fairly counted as descendants of Abraham. Did he mind living in a tent?

Our passage tells us that, when the wind blew and the walls billowed, Abraham would “...*look forward to a city with foundations whose designer and builder was God.*” In other words, for all the troubles and disappointments and delays he endured, Abraham still believed that God would get him somewhere better than the ziggurats and hanging gardens he'd left behind in Babylon. “*These all died in faith,*” our passage teaches, “*not having received the things promised.*”

But it goes on to say that they saw and “*greeted the promises from afar and confessed that they were aliens and sojourners on the earth.*” The point being that Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah only got a glimmer of what you and I have to work with today in terms of faith. They never heard of or read the words of God's own Son in human flesh. They never saw or experienced God's own people worshipping him on all seven continents.

Uncountable numbers of people, all of us trying to get our hearts in the offering plate like Abel, all of us trying to walk with God like Enoch, all of us trying to outlast trouble and disappointment till the promises come in like they did for Abraham and Sarah. It stands to reason that at times our faith will wear and tatter and bend and almost break, but we are far closer to home and have far less reason than they to give up on Christ and gospel and church and each other. And no reason at all to settle for anything less.