

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

August 7, 2022  
The Nineth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 12:32-40  
Genesis 15:1-6  
Psalm 33:12-22  
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16

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If there was ever a letter from the Bible that resonates with our current times, it might be Hebrews. Our text this morning starts with these words...<sup>1</sup>“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith and hope. Two things we really need right now, but two things that are a bit elusive in the times we are living.

How many of you are feeling discouraged these days? Maybe tired or apathetic? Not knowing how things will ever get better? Maybe you even wonder why church matters or where God is when times get tough.

What you might not know is that many historians believe that Hebrews was written for a discouraged church, for people wanting to give up on faith, who had lost hope. They had been following God, they had sacrificed and tried to do the right things but they were getting weary in the midst of their suffering. Enough was enough and this thing called faith wasn't delivering the outcome they felt they had been promised.

Like the Hebrews, it's so easy to get discouraged, to wonder why faith even matters, to doubt the work of God in a deeply troubled world. Read the opening verse again...Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. OK. Got it. It's such a familiar verse. But what does it really mean? How are we to take the idea of faith and hope and translate them into belief and action? And...how do we do that when our strength and conviction might be wavering?

Let me clarify one thing before I go any further....I can't convince you to have faith. Although some Christians hold strongly to a practice called “apologetics” which is simply the discipline of defending religious doctrine through systematic argumentation and discourse. It's a defending of belief and justification of theological tenets. In other words, apologetics is a way to convince someone of why they should believe and have conviction in things not seen. Many seminaries teach classes in apologetics to prepare clergy in how to preach and teach the Gospel in order to turn more hearts to Christ.

You might say, this is even the task of the letter to the Hebrews. It lays out very clearly how Abraham in the Genesis story had so much faith that he obeyed God's direction for his life even in the most improbable of circumstances. He lived how God told him to live, went to foreign lands among strangers, gave up all that was familiar. He received the gift of children even though the text reminds us he was as good as dead. Abraham, by all accounts models for us a faithful ideal.

Apologetics and describing other faithful people is surely one way to tell you about what faith is all about, how we should live it, how we should believe it. But honestly, I am not interested in trying to convince you how or why you should believe. I don't adhere to the practice of apologetics. Why? Because faith isn't something to convince you of. Faith is something you have to experience in your own time and in your own way. Now...does faith come instantaneously for some when they hear about Jesus Christ or about folks like Abraham? Sure. But, from my experience, most of us have a more complicated journey with faith.

So let me offer you this...Faith is a practice. And, it will surely ebb and flow throughout our lives. Some seasons of life, we may experience a strong, resilient faith in God. At other times, we may feel deep discouragement when we move through times of adversity wondering why we are suffering for so long. We may seek to make sense of the divine promises of God, only to wrestle with how they can be true.

That's why encouraging you to commit to practice a path towards faith is more important to me than having a canned explanation of faith. As Bishop Curry likes to say, if you want to know what Episcopalians believe, come and worship with us. What he is saying is that for us to understand faith we have to experience it. Feel it. Let it gradually sink in and open our hearts.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. So, how do we actually get to feeling that assurance and conviction? The Greek word for assurance (hypostasis) is meant to describe something real and tangible, something objective in contrast to something that is illusive or intangible. Think of the concept of assurance as the building block of conviction. We experience tangible, real things when we practice faith and from there we grow our conviction.

So instead of telling you what to believe or why you need to believe, let me invite you to experience the assurance of faith, the hypostasis of faith, so that you know for yourself the power of God's love for you.

As one writer states,

"Faith as it is described in Scripture is not, in other words, a destination. It's not a conclusion or a form of closure. Faith is a longing. Faith is a hunger. Faith is a desire....According to Abraham's story, faith is the restless energy that pushes us out the door and onto the road in pursuit of the inheritance God has promised. Faith is the audacity to undertake a perilous journey simply because God asks us to — not because we know ahead of time where we're going....Faith is the willingness to stretch out our imaginations and see new birth, new life, new joy — even when we feel withered and dead inside."

Faith is a practice. We have established that. But, what does that practice look like? Where do we begin?

I want you all to pick up a Book of Common Prayer in your pew and open to page 845 to An Outline of the Faith (the Catechism). For some of you, this may be the first time you knew this was in the prayer book. I want to encourage everyone to spend time reading through the Catechism and see what ways the practice of faith is described.

Let me highlight a few:

- We are created in the image of God and therefore we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God. (p.845)
- There is one God and the universe God created is good. We are called to enjoy it and to care for it in accordance to God's purposes. (p.846)
- All people are worthy of respect and honor, because all are created in the image of God and all can respond to the love of God.
- God requires that we are to be faithful, to love justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly with God. (p.847)
- We are to show God respect in thought, word, and deed.
- We are to pray, worship, and study God's ways.
- We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. To work and pray for peace, to bear no malice, prejudice, or hatred in our hearts, to be kind to all creatures. To be honest and fair. To resist envy, greed, and jealousy.

These are all ways that we can practice faith. Active and tangible ways we can engage our faith and grow on conviction in God.

The Catechism also reminds us that we won't always get things right. And, our faith has provision for that. That is God's gift of Jesus Christ to free us from sin so that with the help of God we may live in harmony with God, within ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation (p.849)

Here is the thing about any practice...it matters that we show up. It matters that when we fall down, we get back up. It matters that we keep trying. This church is a place where we can practice together and encourage one another. It takes our commitment to trust in God and a willingness to allow God's grace and mercy to change us at our core. And with practice will come the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.

With practice, all of our hearts will open, peace will prevail, and goodness will abound. Thanks be to God. Amen.