

## **Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

*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."*

*All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.*

There is a story that I heard recently that dates back to the mid-1980s before smoking became totally banned on domestic airline flights in the US. About an hour into one flight a man in seat 18c lit up one of those skinny cigars with the plastic tips on them. I think they were called Tiparillos. Well, the man in the seat across the aisle immediately noticed the smell and leaned over and told him that cigar smoking was not allowed on the flight and asked him to please put it out. The smoker ignored him.

In frustration the man called for the flight attendant. She came down the aisle and also told the man smoking that he was in the no-smoking section and, if he wanted to smoke, he was welcome to go to the smoking section, but needed to know that cigars are not allowed anywhere on the plane. No reaction. He just kept on puffing away.

The flight attendant left frustrated not knowing quite what to do. Later, as she was moving up the aisle during the food service portion of the flight, just as she was next to Mr. Tiparillo, the plane hit some turbulence which caused her to dump an entire tray of beverages right on the smoker and on his cigar. As she tried to recover her balance fell back in the opposite

direction, and ended up snuggly and with a big smile in the lap of the man who had earlier call for her help.

In the terminal after the flight the man told the story to a friend. At the end he said, "Don't tell me there's no God. I have proof."

The point of the story? Well, it is not about smoking on planes. It is about the fact that so often when it comes to God, we want proof. We want archeologists to go the Jerusalem and do some digging and show us, "See, here is that photograph of God we have all been searching for." We want DNA evidence, or blind people seeing, or dead people rising, or Jesus standing here with holes in his hands, feet, and side. If we could just get something like that, some proof like that, then we would believe, and all would be well.

And when we don't get proof like that, we play the odds. When there is not concrete proof, we will accept, at least, high degrees of probability. One Oxford professor has done the math on the resurrection. According to all his calculations, after weighing all the factor, quantizing the input, has determined that there is a 97% probability that the resurrection actually happened. Well, that's pretty good. 97%! Only a 3% chance that it is all nonsense. I can go with those odds, can't you?

Wouldn't it be great if it was so clear cut? The trouble is that God is not asking us to seek scientific proof and then play the odds. God is asking for something more from us.

Did you notice that there was no mention of proof in the passage we heard from the Epistle to the Hebrews? It says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Faith is the conviction of things not seen."

We so often hear that knowledge is power. Well, how about this? Could it be that faith is even more powerful? We believe, at least I think most people do, that knowledge will be the solution to all our problems. Could the real answer and real power be found in faith in God, instead of in faith in man?

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Faith in God will result in the things we hope for. Well, I hope for world peace. I hope that people would not kill each other. I hope that leaders won't lie to us in order to gain power over us and fill their bank accounts. I hope that commerce will be based on something beyond just self-interest. I hope that people wouldn't be offended by others who are struggling with the same thing we all are struggling with, but not reaching the exact same conclusion.

How about you? What do you hope for? Maybe you hope that people would choose birth over convenience. Maybe you hope that we would see each other as loving neighbors rather than competitors, or just annoyances. Maybe you hope for a world where people strive to serve instead of being served?

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. But there is a catch. You see, faith is not just a churchy, feel-good word that describes a doctrine that is put on the table for debate and discussion over wine and cheese. Faith is a verb and faith has an object. Faith in God, faith in Christ, is the assurance of things hoped for.

What that means is that faith causes something to happen so that we can be assured of the things we hope for. What faith in God causes to happen is transformation. And I am not talking about transformation of the world. True faith in God, through Christ, causes transformation, first and foremost, in the faithful. Like C.S. Lewis said, "I don't pray to change God. I pray so God might change me."

True faith changes us so that, through that transformation of self, the things we hope for become aligned perfectly with the things God desires for the world. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for because it cannot help but being so. That is why that statement is always true for the faithful. Faith is the assurance that my hopes will be transformed to match God's desires for the world, and God's desire for the world will be realized.

Did I mention that faith is a verb? Well, the first part of the action of that verb is the action of transformation that we invite God to do in us through our faith. The second part is that commitment that we make to act in the world even when the results are not seeable yet. Faith is the conviction of things unseen. Faith is our commitment and conviction to choose to believe in God even when our minds can't be fully convinced through proofs and then being willing to act in faith in the world even when it seems hope-less. To act in the world to bring to pass those things that God has filled us with hope for.

You know, I can't solve the problem of world hunger, but with my commitment in faith, and with God's help, I can hand out bags of food to those who come to the church door. I can't stop people from hating others all around the world, but with my commitment through faith, and with God's help, I can love everyone that comes into my life. I can't stop people from saying and promoting untruth for all sorts of reasons, but with my conviction through faith, and with God's help, I can stand firm in his truth.

That is what just one faithful life can look like. Your faithful life will probably look a little different. But both will contain the willingness to make God's desire our hope and then acting for the sake of that hope in each of our individual lives.

A faithful life is powerful. Can you now imagine what a faithful world might look like?

Amen