

An Honest Pastoral Reflection on Faith

Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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I found this to be a difficult sermon to prepare.

“A sermon on faith?” you’re likely to ask. “A pastor with three decades of preaching ought to have a barrel of sermons on faith.”

Well, it is easy to take a superficial approach to the topic of faith. I could simply say, “You all need to have faith, and the more faith you have the better.” End of sermon.

But across this congregation, I suspect there is as much doubt as there is faith. In fact, some of us have found doubt to be our friend. We left behind our childhood faith because we came to a place where we doubted it. We dropped our fundamentalist upbringing because we eventually doubted it. When we deal honestly with this subject, we discover that doubt is important to faith. Doubt can be a springboard into a deeper, more satisfying faith.

So rather than give a superficial sermon on faith, I want to offer an honest pastoral reflection.

So what is faith? I love what the book of Hebrews says: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Some form of the word faith—either as a noun or a verb—is used twenty-four times in Hebrews 11. Starting with Abel and going through Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, and through the Hebrew prophets, the author describes their acts of faith. It is the Greek word *pistis*. As a noun it is translated as “faith.” The verbal form of the word is translated as “believe.” To have faith, then, is to believe something. It can also be translated as “trust.” We trust something to be true.

The writer of Hebrews describes faith in two ways. The first is this: faith is “the assurance of things hoped for.” The NIV says, “being sure of what we hope for.” Let’s dig deeper into that for a moment. For the writer of Hebrews, there is a forward-looking dimension to faith—the things hoped for. They are not here now. We hope for them with assurance.

Abraham and Sarah are two examples of faith in Hebrews 11. You may remember that God made a covenant with Abraham, saying that God would make of Abraham a great nation. God said that one day they would number as many as the stars in the heavens. At the time of the covenant, though, that great nation was just two people: Abraham and Sarah. That was a problem, but here was their biggest problem. Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah was 90. When God told Abraham that they would have a son, the book of Genesis says Abraham “fell on his face and laughed” and that Sarah too laughed at the news.

But they trusted God. They believed in God. They had faith, and Isaac was born. Then Jacob. Then Esau. They became a great nation. They had assurance of things hoped for.

Let me tell you something I hope for. The men in my family had our annual fishing trip in Guntersville last weekend. My younger brother was there from Virginia with his two sons. My 83 year-old father-in-law was there. A 72 year-old cousin. My father was not there this year because he is providing care at home. We had ten of us. Other than fish tales, and there were a lot of those, we spent time reminiscing about family members who have died. My uncle Charles. He had the biggest laugh you’ve ever heard. My paternal grandfather. His nickname was Bumper. Someone would throw their hand up to greet him, and he would throw his hand up and say, “Let ‘em bump!” I was always afraid to ask what he meant.

Here’s what I hope. I hope somehow some day we will all re-connect. That their story and my story and all the stories of human history will somehow come together. Call it heaven, or call it something else. What is that going to look like? I don’t know. It is beyond my capability. Let me be perfectly honest with you here. I don’t believe in pearly gates and streets of gold. As beautiful as they sound, I think

those are symbols the early church used to describe the indescribable. What's this coming together going to be like? Well, they said, it's going to be like walking through gates made of pearl onto streets paved with gold. It was their way of saying that it is going to be wonderful. Spectacular. Fabulous. It is beyond our imagination.

So we hope. We trust God. We have faith, the assurance of something hoped for.

The second description of faith here is just as rich, maybe even more so. The writer of Hebrews says that faith is "the conviction of things not seen." The word "conviction" comes from their legal system. It could be translated as "proof" or "demonstration." In a court of law, some kind of proof has to be presented to make a case. So how do we give proof of something that is not seen?

Love cannot be seen, can it? Love is an emotion that we cannot see, but we believe in love because we see proof of it, demonstrations of it. We saw several last week in El Paso. Andre and Jordan Anchandro were on their way to a bar-b-q and decided to stop at Walmart to pick up some food for the party and purchase a few school supplies. A man with a gun entered the store and opened fire killing 22 people, including the Anchandros. Andre died shielding his wife, Jordan. Jordan died shielding their two-month-old baby, Paul, who survived the massacre.

David Johnson did it too. He was also in that Walmart with his wife and their granddaughter. When the shooter opened fire, he pushed his wife and granddaughter to safety, leaving himself as a target. Hours later he died of the gunshots he received saving those he loved.

One more because I think these stories are very important. Juan Velazquez and his wife, Estela, were there too. When the shooter opened fire, Juan shielded his wife with his body. He was shot at such close range the bullet passed through him and hit his wife. After several surgeries, he died. His wife survived.

Love is an emotion. We cannot see it. But we can see proof of it. We can believe in love because we see demonstrations of love.

Can we believe in something not seen? Yes, we can. I have never seen God, but I have a conviction of something not seen. Again let me be real honest about this. The God I believe in is not an old male with a long flowing beard sitting on a throne up in the nether regions. God is not bound by gender. God is not bound by any human qualities at all. God is beyond all that. In fact, the less we say about God the more accurate we are. Then why does the Bible call God, "Our Father? Why does the Bible describe God's mighty outstretched arm?" Again, the writers of the Bible were doing the best they could to describe the indescribable. God, in reality, is so far beyond that our simple, finite minds cannot fathom it.

Our simplest critics will sometimes say, "Show me God. If he's there, show me your God."

I smile and say, "No need. My belief in God is a conviction of something not seen."

We call it *pistis*. Faith. Trust. Belief. The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Faith is the ability to trust something from the core of our being. The brilliant New Testament scholar from the south, Clarence Jordan, said, "it is betting your life on the unseen realities." (*Cotton Patch Gospels*)

I identify with this man. He had a young son who was likely disabled. Many think the boy had a seizure disorder. The man took his son to Jesus. Jesus asked how long this had been happening to his son. The man said it had been since childhood. He pleaded with Jesus. If you can help us, Jesus, please do. Jesus told him that all things are possible for those who believe. And here's what the man said. This is one of the most honest statements ever made: "I believe; help my unbelief."

This was a difficult sermon to prepare, but it is honest. Most of us have some faith. And most of us have some doubt. My prayer is that our doubt will be a springboard into a deeper, more satisfying faith.

Closing Prayer

We do believe, Lord, as much as we can. Help our unbelief. Amen.