

*Trusting in Something Better*

Scripture Lessons: Luke 12:32-40, Hebrews 11:29-40

Hebrews 11 is a lesson in faith by the stories of the faithful. It begins the definition, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” And it then sings the song of countless examples to illustrate its point.

Faith has gotten a bad name these days, and it has on and off for a long time. I don’t mean what outsiders say about the Christian faith. I mean what Christians sometimes think faith is. Let me put it this way: there is a world of difference between the certainty a lot of Christians are looking for and the assurance that is at the heart of the definition in Hebrews. Here is the difference between certainty and assurance: certainty wants sureness it can see in the present tense, but assurance steps into the future because of a hope that is out there beyond knowing where it cannot see. Most all the time, we are not honest about how much we want certainty, and how much not being sure can make us anxious.

A couple of days after September 11, 2001, Rev. John Lloyd Ogilvie was interviewed on NPR. As Senior Pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian and former Chaplain of the Senate, this quintessential, public Presbyterian spokesman with a deep and assuring voice said “Well, there is much that we do not know, but one thing we can be sure of: God is in control.” I’ll admit I said some theological comments that came less from my carrel in the seminary library than from my upbringing in a mechanics shop.

In a deep crisis in the present tense, a Presbyterian minister gave the wrong answer. He let his own anxiety get the best of him, and compounded the blunder in some version of the old hyper-Calvinistic bale-out: “We don’t know why, but God knows everything. ... God controls everything that happens, even when it looks like evil and chance and stupidity and human frailty are running the show.” It is a comfortable view, but it is false comfort. On September 12, most anyone who thought God caused a skyscraper to fall had another reason to walk away from that kind of god. Real Presbyterians have always believed that evil is real, and God does not cause our evil. The right answer is that God is stronger than evil, and God never leaves us to evil.

Why is it that in a time of crisis, we turn to memory and beliefs that give us comfort, even when the belief contradicts reality. Whether we hear a Presbyterian minister or some politician, we tend to want the certain voice even when we know what it is telling us does not make any sense. We jump to any certainty because we are anxious, even when we know the certainty is false. I’ll be honest with you. In my years as a pastor, I have found that most of the people who need for God to be in control just need things to be in control. Faith is not the hidden certainty that everything that happens is something God caused, because then everything I do is ultimately God’s fault. That thinking has to blame God for 9-11. That thinking is just absurd.

Closer to home, let’s admit that all of us can get anxious when crisis is less a topic of discussion and more a personal reality in the present tense. For example: a congregation loses a pastor, and suddenly it looks for anything that is wrong with everything that is happening. Presbyterians would never panic because “God is in charge,” but we move pretty quickly to fill the empty space with some sure suggestion, and we feel relieved when the Interim shows up. He

or she may not be God, but at least someone is in charge and things are back to a myth of control.

Then we start looking back, hunting for when it went wrong. We remember times of more certainty when everything was comfortable and finances were stable and leadership was sound and more people were involved. We still lack some sureness that God is in control at the moment, because the Interim is only interim. We start thinking that the solution is to go find a future that looks like our past to get us back to where we were before everything was changing, back to when God was “in charge.” We know what it was like then, and we are sure we can get back there if we just remember the delusions more than the details of the past.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for” – *not* the evidence of things *already* seen.

The people in the long list of Hebrew 11 tell us that hope never looks back to certainty. Abraham packs up and heads out without a clue where he is headed. He has no GPS, not even a map. He just has a promise that God is ahead of him more than back there. Sarah has hope in spite of herself, laughs out loud when she hears she can still get pregnant. And when the laugh is on her in her certainty of age and barrenness, she names the boy Isaac – a word that means “laughter” – because her heart is full of joy and promise. Moses gives up the certainty of rule and riches, and wanders all over the desert before he leads the people into a wilderness of uncertainty. Even a cloud in the day and a pillar of fire in the night are not enough guide, and over and over they lose faith in the promise. But the promise never fails them, and the promise of a land becomes the crossing of a river into more uncertainty and greater promise. The list grows with the generations. People after people face danger and death and destruction for the stronger hope that might come.

Over and over again, people act on nothing more than hope in a promise, and they step out with faith into faithfulness. They move their present tense toward their future tense. Their fears and anxieties are no match for “the assurance of things hoped for.” The promise is just too big to pass up. None of them were sure of anything except that there was nothing that was sure except the promise of a future with God. So they packed up what little they needed for the journey and left the rest of their past behind. They said a grateful goodbye and took nothing but the lessons in the examples of the people who had been there before – not knowing where they were headed and still heading out. The only certainty in their present was uncertainty, and when everything was up-for-grabs they grabbed on to God and put all their hopes in nothing but the promise.

Every new congregation is born in hope. This congregation was born in a vision and a promise and a hope for a future. Every new congregation embraces the future, grabs on to the promise of unknowns, fills its conversation with plans and its prayer with questions about who and what God wants them to become. Faith comes easy for full-of-hope people. No faith-full people dream of the certainty of continuation of a present. Assurance is the celebration of an uncertainty that the future is in the promising of God. And God never stops promising.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

Hope drives faith; we are saved by hope. Faithfulness is in the hoping – in the continual hoping that always pulls us into God’s promise. When hope turns away from the promise, hope is helpless and faith is frozen. The promise is everything, and it is worth giving everything to

nothing but a promise. The promise is always out there somewhere just beyond our vision of sure and always beyond our grasp of certain.

“...all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made complete.”

Have you noticed how few of our dreams ever come true? We dream and turn dreams to plans and plans to work. We want to see a place, and we surf the web or read a travel book, and see ourselves in those places. We plan our routes and stops, our priorities and must-do's, and try to anticipate what will be before we are there. In reality, the trip never matches the dream. The great experiences are usually the surprises, and the disappointments are often times when reality did not match our imaginations. It was the dreaming in the first place that got us there. The visions of what we saw that were better than the dreaming are what keep us dreaming about what we have yet to see.

In the summer of 2007, I took a 6 day, 60 mile solo backpacking trip in the Wind River Range of Montana. The route was marked on the topo maps, carefully planned across the ridges up and down, and up and down. I go to tune my vision: to see small details and great vistas, the different beauty in the ordinary place, the profound wonder that is more than my imagining. But in the reality of the first day when the 65 lb pack is heavier in the climb than in the car, and the hailstorm has made ledges on the cliffs look like snow, the dream is harder to hold, the promise harder to remember. Step-by-step up the long trail that is all up, I always tend to forget why I thought this was such a good idea when I looked at the map. But I trust the promise is bigger than my pounding heart and aching muscles. I keep looking forward and keep taking steps. About two-thirds up and near exhausted, I look back to see how far I have come. It cheers me into thinking I'll get to the top I still cannot see. As light falls, I pitch the little tent and fall into deep sleep and wake to more climbing the next day. For some strange reason, the pack isn't lighter and the trail just as steep and hard. Eventually I reach the top, and see the next valley and the next ridge and the one beyond – more ups and downs. The promise is bigger than I imagined, and the “something better” beyond puts me on the move again.

There is a power in promise, and the power is in the promising. The power is precisely in the way that the promising overcomes our need for certainty and control. The promise is worth the risk of what may be in the hope of what we may become. The promising of the “something better” that is always before us pulls us into a future that is always before us. We step and take the next step, and the next – trusting that around the bend or over the crest there is more to see, – and more than we can see. That is how *promising* is more than a promise, and *hoping* is more than having hope.

And that is how *trusting* is more than having faith. Trust is faith in action. Trusting is faith on the move. Trusting turns faith into faith-full. Trusting is acting on “the assurance of the things hoped for,” committing to “the conviction of things not seen,” and casting our vision past the horizon.

“We trust a faith-full Savior.” Jesus trusted God enough to act in the uncertainty, to commit to what he knew in the face of what he could not know, who cast his vision to the tomorrow that was beyond his own death in the horizon of what a God who promised to raise the death could do beyond what he had done.

Hoping in the “something better” of the promising God leads us to the stepping of the trusting. We step into the uncertainty and look to a future and to the promising that is always just beyond in the not-yet-seeing, just ahead in what is still in store.

With any congregation, an interim season is a way-station in the journey. It is time to check the map to see where we are in the present, to look back to see how we got here. But more important, it is time to remember that the way we got here was by moving toward the promise and trusting in the “something better.” So in this season, let’s just trust God enough to act on the assurance of things hoped for, and commit ourselves to our conviction of what is yet to see and trust the something better with God that is beyond the horizon always just beyond us, – and still with us all along the way.