

Scripture for Sunday August 11th 2019

Gen 15:1-6 (NIV)

15 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”² But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Heb 11:1-3; 8-16 (NIV)

11 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.² This is what the ancients were commended for.³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Sermon: Walking by Faith

As you will have gathered from our readings and hymns, our theme today is that of *faith*. This word - with its rich, multifaceted meaning - receives a mixed response today. Some see it as weak and negative, preferring instead hard *facts* and *certainty* which are deemed to be less nebulous than faith. This is stereotypically portrayed in the so-called “conflict” between science and religion or that between faith and reason. The two categories are often presented as opposites or non-overlapping domains. Consequently, some people question whether I, as a physicist, have lost my “mind” in being a person of faith and in becoming a minister. The short answer is “not at all!” and I’ll explain why in a moment. Other people pair *faith* with *doubt*. Some go further and add adjectives to them: *blind* faith and *honest* doubt, so making in clear which one is preferable. But is it not that simple because we all have experiences than can cause us to doubt and then we often wish we had *more* faith - and sometimes admire those who seem to exemplify faith. This is perhaps especially true when such people do noble and courageous things, like Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and many other more ordinary people. So, what is it? Is faith foolishness or admirable? As I said, the term receives mixed responses today.

I think we need to elevate *faith* in both our private and public consciousness as there is much more to faith than we imagine! Faith is *not* something to be embarrassed about but to celebrate and promote. Many think that knowledge is founded on skepticism and therefore, ironically, see doubting as the route to “truth”! But as Newbigin put it: “You don’t learn anything except by *first* believing something and – conversely - if you doubt everything, you’ll learn nothing.” He continues, “On the other hand, believing everything uncritically is the road to disaster! Consequently, doubting is essential. However, rational doubt always rests on faith, *not the other way around.*”¹ We must always have provisional trust or *faith* in something in order to be able to later doubt it! That is true in our relationships, which is why when trust has been abused, we doubt because that trust is broken - and this is often accompanied by suffering. It is also true in science; we have *prior* belief in an orderly cosmos that really exists,² in the capabilities of the human kind,³ and in our methodology of knowing.⁴ Only from *faith* in these basic assumptions can scientific knowledge arise. St. Anselm said: “I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, *but I believe in order to understand.*” Surprising as it may seem to many, this prior commitment - this *faith* - is true in *all* ways of knowing, including religious faith.⁵ And that includes atheism; it takes faith to *not* believe in God, just as it takes faith to believe in his existence. Atheism is not the absence of faith; absolute *certainty* is the opposite of faith. That is a modern way to interpret St Paul, who said, “We walk by faith, not by sight.”⁶ Only when we can see things clearly - or with certainty, including the future, will we *not* need faith. Until then, faith is *always* essential. The question,

¹ Adapted from Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, (Eerdmans, 1995) 24-25.

² We also believe that the universe is “*uniform*,” so that the regularity we discover is application throughout the cosmos.

³ As Einstein commented: “The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.”

⁴ See Reddish, *Science and Christianity*, (Wipf and Stock, 2016), chapter 3.

⁵ Scientist-philosopher, Michael Polanyi, makes point central to his (post-critical) view on the *nature* of knowing (see Reddish, *Science and Christianity*, (Wipf and Stock, 2016), 57-59.

⁶ 2 Cor 5:7. This sentiment is echoed in 1 Cor 13:12, 2 Cor 4:18.

then, is what is our faith *in*. Consequently, I think there is lot more faith around that people recognize. When you sat down, you had faith that the pew would hold you up. When you drive a car and press the brake, you have faith that it will work and slow you down. When you fly, you have faith in the plane's pilot. If we truly lived based on doubt, we would be too anxious to do anything! We may have good grounds for faith, based on past experience, but that is no guarantee of the future – faith is still necessary.

The unknown writer of Hebrews understood that point.⁷ The background context for his sermon on faith is given at the end of chapter 10.⁸ The delay of Christ's return seems to have had a demoralizing effect on the community.⁹ While it's unlikely that they were facing martyrdom,¹⁰ nevertheless, some had experienced economic or physical persecution, public shame and hostility, and we are told others had been subject to prison and to the plunder of their possessions.¹¹ How does the writer encourage these Christians to remain steadfast and to persevere through such difficult days? He connects with them by talking passionately about the meaning of *faith* and past *heroes* of faith, emphasizing hope in God's promises.

The writer's profound working definition of faith is that it's "the *assurance*¹² of things *hoped* for, the *conviction* of things *not* seen."¹³ That assurance is *in* the on-going promises of God who has been present with his people in the past, even through dark times, and continues to be with us today, and who will bring his redemptive work in the world to completion. Regardless of our present reality when all hell is breaking loose around us, faith looks to God and trusts him for everything - that those things we *hope* for, namely God's peace, justice, mercy and salvation, will ultimately be realized. We may well see glimpses of that future reality in our own times, but regardless of what we experience, faith is the "*conviction* of things not seen." The Greek word translated "conviction" comes from the law courts indicating an *objective* grounds or "proof" for the *subjective* aspect of faith. The writer then lists examples for such confidence in the unseen; more on that in moment. Note that faith and hope are closely linked here.¹⁴ Hope today is often seen as a wistful, vague, and weak *feeling*. Contrast that sentiment of mere optimism to *confident* hope that is absolutely certain what it believes *is* true and

⁷ This book is *not* a letter, but considered a sermon and this chapter illustrates that oratory quality. While Hebrews was traditionally associated with Paul, even by the second century AD, church fathers (e.g., Clement, Origen) voiced their doubts. The Greek is of excellent quality and the tone, imagery, and vocabulary different from Paul's. It is speculated that it could have been written by Apollos, or Barnabas, or Priscilla – but no one knows. Although the 'sermon' is addressed to the "Hebrews," the audience are *Christian* Jews and for non-Jews with a good knowledge of Jewish traditions. The intended audience is not clear either, though Rome is a reasonable possibility; the work is dated between 60-95 AD.

⁸ Heb 10:32-39.

⁹ Heb 10:25,32-25. Perhaps especially if this was written after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. If Hebrews is to the Jewish Christians of Rome, then emperor (e.g. Nero, AD 64) persecutions may also be a factor, as could the martyrdoms of Paul and Peter (c. AD 64-68).

¹⁰ Heb 12:4.

¹¹ Heb 10:33-34.

¹² The word translated as "assurance" (*hypostasis*) is the same word translated as "very being" (or *essence*) in Heb 1:3.

¹³ Heb 11:1 (NRSV). This does not mean "believing it makes it so" or that this is *blind* faith, as the chapter then explains.

¹⁴ And throughout the chapter. Curiously, Paul differentiates them in 1 Cor 13 – "faith, hope, and love."

what it expects *will* eventually come about.¹⁵ That's the kind of faith that sings, "We *shall* overcome" in the face of racism, violence, and injustice. That kind of faith is needed in every generation.

Now it's one thing to have faith in things we see frequently, like sunrise and sunset, it's another to have the "firm conviction in things as yet *unseen*."¹⁶ This paradox flies in the face of the certainty many desire today. Yet, just as we can't see wind, so we can't see love; but we can see evidence that both are present.¹⁷ To underline that point, the writer of Hebrews then says, "By faith we understand that the universe *itself* was formed by God's command, so that what is *seen* was made from things that are *not visible*."¹⁸ The Hebrews 11 catalogue of "faith in things unseen" begins, then, with creation itself. The birth and on-going existence of the physical universe is due to God's action and faithfulness. This is the primary objective grounds to have faith in things unseen. And even physicists agree with the idea that the universe was - and is - made up of things (like quarks and energy) that are not visible!

There then follows a long list of Israel's spiritual heroes who lived "by faith," *demonstrating* their confidence in things hoped for and their conviction of things not seen. The point being simply that in our tough times, take a look in the rear-view mirror to those people of faith and courage, who persevered when facing the unknown or the seemingly impossible. In my mind, Abraham is the true pioneer of faith because he initially trusted God without the benefit of prior historical evidence of God's faithfulness.¹⁹ In Genesis 12 God called him leave his homeland and his family to a land that God would show him. God promised to "bless him and make his descendants into a great nation and that all the peoples of the world will be blessed through him."²⁰ Theirs was a literal journey of faith and they were utterly dependent on God for provisions along the way. "By faith Abraham made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise."²¹ They were refugees or resident aliens living as foreign nomads in a strange land. The writer of Hebrews *reinterprets* the Genesis account of Abraham by contrasting temporary "tents" *not* with permanent, physical territory but that Abraham "looked forward to the city that has *foundations*, whose architect and builder is God,"²² namely the heavenly New Jerusalem.²³

¹⁵ I may hope for a better world, for a new, bodily life beyond the grave, but unless I truly believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, my hope may degenerate into mere optimism.

¹⁶ That flies in the face of a secular "what you *see* is what you get" culture and can therefore bring social ridicule.

¹⁷ In a similar way, while faith is often the conviction of things not seen, there is - for many - an "*aha*" moment in life with things make some kind of sense and they "see" something that compels them to follow Jesus.

¹⁸ Heb 11:3 (NIV/NRSV) This is *rhetorically* part of the writer's twinning of faith with unseen. This is *not* a doctrinal statement on creation, as such, i.e., "creation out chaos" (*creatio ex materia*) or "creation out of (literally) nothing" (*creatio ex nihilo*); see also Wis 11:17; 2 Macc 7:28; Rom 4:17, Col 1:16; John 1:3. Such theological/philosophical debates arose later.

¹⁹ The pre-history of Gen 1-11 has a legendary quality about and should *not* be seen as *literal* history, but *literary* history revealing profound spiritual truths. Abraham is, therefore, the *primary* person in Israel's history - the father of faith.

²⁰ Gen 12:1-3; Heb 6:12-15; 11:8. Notice how the writer of Hebrews changes "land" to "place," so sounding notably less territorial (and anticipating 11:10;16; 12:22-24).

²¹ Heb 11:9. (Of course it was not known as the "Promised Land" in Abraham's day - that came with Moses and the exodus.)

²² Heb 11:10.

²³ This is made explicit in Heb 11:16; 12:22-24; 13:14; see also 2 Esdras 3:13-14. Note that the writer of Hebrew's view of the afterlife (i.e., the "new Jerusalem") is *not* well-developed, as in the case of Paul in, say, 1 Cor 15.

Clearly, the author, following centuries of Jewish practice, had no issues in reinterpreting Scripture for *his* times.

By faith, Abraham also believed that God would provide him a promised heir through Sarah. As our Old Testament reading said, “Abram believed the LORD, and God credited it to him as righteousness”²⁴ or he received God’s approval. Now, we can’t let this simply pass without comment as Abraham seems to have had his doubts because he tries to fulfil God’s promise by his own efforts with Hagar (see Gen 16) and when God later said, “No, your son will come through your wife, Sarah,” *both* Abraham and Sarah *laughed* at the impossibility of it given their advancing years.²⁵ Regardless of this natural human response, Abraham and Sarah are rightly heroes of faith in the unseen. That’s because *none* of the patriarchs entered full possession of the promises that God made to Abraham; they died as nomads living in tents. They did not *see* for themselves how their descendants did indeed become a great nation and that - through Jesus – Abraham indeed blessed the entire world. The writer of Hebrews tells *his* audience that history proved Abraham was right to trust in God.²⁶

Faith in the unseen is, then, a mysterious adventure that requires patience, endurance, tenacity, obedience – even in the face of suffering and grief.²⁷ This is difficult when we are not sure where God is leading us or when we don’t see evidence of God in action. As in all pastoral care, often our prayers are not answered in the *way* we would like, or on the *timescale* we want. The life of faith is therefore a pilgrimage; we follow in the footsteps of such heroes like Abraham and Sarah, holding fast to things unseen and looking forward to the future, trusting that God will keep his promises as he has done in the past. Faith matters; our faith provides assurance that God has our best interests at heart and knows what we hope for in this life and the next. We live today in the inward reality that ultimately “crying and pain will be no more,” as it says in Revelation,²⁸ and at the same time, we pray for those who mourn and work tirelessly to ease the pain of those who are wounded and who live in hardship.

I encourage you to have faith in things not seen by reflecting on the faithfulness of the kind of God we believe in and to consider the hard evidence for that assurance. The writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers to consider again the faith of their fathers. So, *who* are your past heroes of faith that help to inspire and ground you in hard times? They may be biblical characters; they may be people you know or have known. Reflect on their faith and be reassured in the firm Christian hope as you walk by faith. Remember, faith needs nurturing through reading, prayer, reflection, conversation, and practice.

²⁴ Gen 15:6; Heb 11:6; see also Hab 2:4. This “righteousness by faith” is a key theme for Paul in Gal 3 and Rom 4; see also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Makes-You-OK-with-God.pdf>

²⁵ Gen 17:15-22; 18:10-15.

²⁶ Moreover, that in spite of everything, Abraham and Sarah never lost their vision, their hope, because they never wanted to go back to their homeland; see Heb 11:15.

²⁷ These qualities of Abraham also apply to Jesus Christ.

²⁸ Rev 21:1, 3-5. This borrows Jewish imagery from Isa 35:10; 65:17, 18a, 19b.

Finally, in Greek mythology, “faith” was one of the spirits that escaped Pandora’s box and fled back to heaven so abandoning humanity.²⁹ So in Luke’s gospel when Jesus says, “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?”³⁰ he was speaking to a [Hellenistic] culture that believed that the spirit of faith had already left. As we have seen, the writer of Hebrews combats such melancholy and encourages Christians who are having trouble holding on to hope in hard times. I believe Jesus will inevitably find faith on earth, for faith is *foundational* to human existence, the question is, “Faith in what?” Last week I spoke about short-sighted faith in money, and possessions;³¹ these are things we can see but may not help in a crisis. Have faith in a reliable God who through creation and heroes of the past has provided tangible evidence to have confident faith in things *unseen* when the way ahead is foggy or unknown. Often our faith may be little – like a mustard seed,³² but it’s *in* a big God. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁹ According to the 6th-century BC Greek poet, Theognis of Megara, Pandora’s box contained blessings, *not* just evils. Interestingly, what remained in the box was *hope*. The Hebrews’ audience would know of this myth.

³⁰ Luke 18:8.

³¹ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Wealth-and-Worry.pdf>

³² See Luke 17:6; Matt 17:20.