

"By Faith"
Hebrews 11:1-16

August 7, 2016

12th Sunday After Pentecost

As many of you know, I am a die hard Chicago Cubs' baseball fan. Some people think that this is entirely appropriate for me, being a pastor, too. People will say, "Doesn't it take a lot of faith to be both?" Well, it certainly takes a lot of faith to be a pastor. But to be a Cubs' fan? Well, the case could be made that it takes a lot of faith to be that, too. After all, the Cubs haven't won a World Series since 1908. The Cubs haven't even won a National League pennant since World War II was finishing up in 1945 when they lost to Bernie's Tigers in seven games. There have been near misses and big collapses in 1969, 1984, 1989, 2003, and a couple since we moved to Montana. Yet, I and millions of other fans continue to follow a team that hasn't won in our grandparents' life time. Is it faith or is it foolish and wishful thinking? (Insert your own joke here.) It all depends on how one defines "faith."

Faith is more than blind trust or positive wishful thinking. It is much more solid and sure than that. Our text begins by defining faith. It reads, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Two things we notice about this definition.

First, faith trusts in the future – "things hoped for"; "things not seen". Faith is not needed to believe things that are happening in the present. We can simply observe them.

Secondly, there is a certainty to faith that goes beyond wishful thinking. Faith brings with it "assurance" and "conviction". Faith does not foolishly wish for or optimistically desire something. Faith knows and believes in something.

The author of our text gives a list of examples (to be continued in next week's epistle reading) of people who had such faith. And all of them were looking to the future. Abel and Enoch were looking for lives blessed by God in the future. Noah was looking forward to salvation from an upcoming great flood. Abraham and Sarah were looking forward to receiving land as an inheritance and many descendants. They all looked forward with assurance and conviction.

We, the people of God who have been called to live by faith in the present age, do so by looking to the future. This is difficult, even for Christians, because so many people are focused on the "here and now" of life. To live by faith is not to be in love with this world and dwell upon it. We are in this world but we do not belong to it. We look forward with assurance and conviction to things we hope for; things we do not yet see. We look forward in faith to a future life blessed by God; salvation from this evil age; a new heaven and a new earth as our inheritance; and the return of the descendant of Abraham and Sarah – Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This isn't easy. Faith never is. It seems especially difficult now since the future seems so evil and uncertain. Yet the people in our text faced an equally evil and uncertain future as we do and they did it in faith. How? Faith is able to look to the future by first looking to the past. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah were able to face the future with assurance and conviction because they had faith in what God had done for them in the past.

What God had done for them was this: From the time of Adam and Eve onward, God had promised to send a Messiah – a Savior to deliver them from the mess sin had caused them and deliver them to their final glorious destination. Where humanity had failed to obey God's Law and had sinned, the Messiah would obey the Law of God perfectly in their place and for their sake. Where humanity deserved God's wrath and punishment for their sin, the Messiah would step in, shield them from God's wrath and take their punishment for them. Where humanity had separated themselves from God, the Messiah would bring them back to God for all eternity.

On the basis of this promise which they all heard from the mouth of God or from those who had heard it from the mouth of God, they faced the future with faith. We face the future with faith in the same way – with assurance and conviction – by first looking to the past. Only instead of looking to a promise, we have something much better. We look to the fulfillment of the promise made to the people of God so long ago.

The Messiah – the Savior, Jesus Christ – has come. Jesus has fulfilled all of the requirements of God's Law, perfectly and completely, for you. He has given to you His holiness that you might stand before a holy God.

Jesus has endured God's wrath and anger against you and suffered God's punishment for all of your sins. He has earned forgiveness for all of your sins of thought and word, in addition to deed. This

means, as the Word of God says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1)

Jesus has overcome death and hell for you by undergoing them Himself and overcoming them. Death lost its power to hold on to you when Jesus died on the cross as the sacrifice for all sin. Life and immortality were brought to light for you when Jesus rose from the grave to life once again.

We face the future in faith with assurance and conviction because there is literally nothing that can stop us. Sin has been forgiven and replaced with righteousness in us. The devil and all of his evil forces have been defeated. Death has been abolished for us. Hell has been closed to us. A new heaven and a new earth have been promised to us. For now, we live by faith, but how?

Faith is more than simply trusting in a reality which is not readily perceived and experiencing assurance and conviction because of that. Faith does more. Faith acts upon that trust with obedient faithfulness. Faith is more than knowledge and belief, although it involves both of those. Faith shows itself in obedient living.

Abel showed his faith in his sacrifices. Enoch showed his faith by walking with God in His commands. Noah showed his faith by building a big ship in the middle of the desert. Abraham showed His faith by leaving his father's home and traveling to a destination not yet revealed to him, trusting God to supply him with descendants, even though (as our Old Testament lesson shows) it was difficult at times.

It was difficult because they had only God's Word of promise to rely on. There was no physical proof to sustain them in their lives of obedience. They lived by faith, not by sight. And, our text says, "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." Their lives of faithfulness were not rewarded in this life, but they didn't care. They died, looking ahead to the life which was to come. And they were happy with that.

We show our faith in the same way. It is not by merely trusting Jesus but by trusting in Jesus AND acting on that trust in lives of obedient faithfulness. We are to be obedient to God as a sign of our faith. It's not easy. Like Abel, we may be killed. Like Noah, we may be mocked, persecuted, and rejected. Like Abraham and Sarah, we may struggle with doubt. Yet we keep our eyes on (and our faith) that which is better and ahead of us – our homeland – the new heavens and the new earth.

This is no easier or harder for us that it was for the saints listed in our lesson for today. They did not have it better than us simply because they are in the Bible. We do not have it worse than they simply because we live in so-called "modern times". Both they and we have the same faith and have received it in the same way as a gift of God through the Word of God. As the Bible says of faith, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In your baptism, God gave you faith. In His Word and by Holy Communion, God continually renews, reinforces, and strengthens your faith. By the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word and Sacraments, you will experience the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." You will also, on the basis of that faith, live lives of faithful obedience, both here in church as members of His body and out in your homes, schools, work places, and communities in the various vocations into which God has placed you. No matter what happens, keep your eyes focused on the future homeland. You may die before you attain it, but by God's grace for the sake Jesus Christ, you WILL attain it. And that will make all of the life of faith – the trusting in that which you could not see and the obedience based on that trust all worthwhile.

Faith in the Chicago Cubs (or any other entity on earth) is, at best, wishful thinking and, at worst, a colossal waste of time (I know first hand) even if they win. Nothing is sure in this life on this earth. Faith, therefore, is always misplaced. But what God has promised in Christ and has fulfilled in His holy life and sacrificial death – forgiveness, life, and salvation – IS sure. What God is promising through Christ's glorious resurrection and mighty ascension into heaven – a better country, a heavenly one – is just as sure. By faith, be assured of God's blessings which you hope for and convinced of God's blessings which you do not yet see. Act on that trust with obedient faithfulness. That's how the people of old received their commendation from God. That's how we will, too. Amen.