

Our Unbelieving Faith

The passage read from the 11th chapter of Hebrews is one that is very familiar; or at least, that first verse is so well known and quoted that even those outside the Christian tradition know it...even if they might not know from where the quote came. It is considered a scriptural definition of faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” With this and some other verses, Hebrews makes a good slogan book, its rhetorical eloquence makes it extremely quotable; the quote which begins this passage is not only lyrical but profound. With these words, the writer offers us a lesson about the steadfast nature of faith. In this first verse two statements are made about faith with two Greek words *upostasis* and *elegchos*. First, faith is *upostasis* which indicates a standing under, literally. Earlier in Hebrews the writer asserts that he and his audience have become sharers of Christ in a relationship that will endure as they hold fast the beginning of the “this standing” or relationship firmly until the end. This understanding is something basic, something solid, something very firm so it then provides a place to stand from which one can hope. The second word is one not often found in our scriptures but relates to evidence brought forth often evidence not accepted or that is not welcomed. The “standing in relationship” to God provided by Christ becomes the proof itself. Faith presents that proof, even the rebuke, of things that you have difficulty seeing. The writer is telling his audience that they can stand firmly upon faith, and you will not want to deny or reject the evidence that faith presents. In verse 3 the writer states that we can know that the things we can see have come from things we cannot see in a reference to Genesis and God’s creation of the world. Thus he reminds his audience that simply affirming that God is creator of all gives the foundation of faith that has been demonstrated in the lives of those whose stories he recounts here. Although several Jewish patriarchs’ stories are mentioned, the one of Abram/Abraham is detailed most fully, especially as regards two promises God made: the one of land and the one of many descendants. What these narratives reveal about faith has several levels. When Abram was first contacted by God the promise was for land somewhere unnamed, and the promised required him to pack up his family and head for this unnamed destination. His faith was trust that God could and would do what was promised if he acted on what he was promised. The promise for descendants came later and with increasing detail about the number and that they would come from his wife Sarah. Throughout their journey Abraham and Sarah would never actually see the realization of those promises...together they had only the one child, Isaac, and although Abraham prospered, he always remained a foreigner in the land promised once it was named. Those of the Jewish tradition who are in this writer’s audience have seen demonstrations of God’s faithfulness: a land, a son and numerous descendants beginning with Abraham’s grandsons...but these things happened after the death of those who first received the promise. For these early Christians, faith gives them that sure, unassailable foundation to hold onto their confession of trust until the end. Faith gives not only a foundation, a grounding to which we can hold fast, but it also orients us toward the future and gives us courage to move forward, the ability to move out into the unknown. Sarah and Abraham knew that the promise of God is also a call, and so they lived out the second dimension of faithfulness, that of moving forward. They lived in tents because they were not ultimately called to the land of Canaan. That was not their final destination. The journey they made was part of their obedience, but Canaan was not their home. They were

looking for another city, the city with foundations not made with hands, “whose architect and builder is God as stated in 11:10. They kept moving toward the future that was held by God. That third verse which refers back to God’s creation of the world from things not seen lifts God’s power to create new life in those who trust. God’s power can create what is seen from things that are unseen. Faith is not something ultimately dependent upon us. It comes to us at God’s own initiative mediated by God’s Word and engenders a hope-filled response to the promises of God. This hope-filled response of trust in God then makes “visible” through the lives of believers what would otherwise remain “invisible.” In other words, someone who trusts in God’s promises becomes God’s own witness to the new creation that is breaking into our “everyday” visible world through the gospel of Jesus Christ. In faith, as in resurrection, God calls new life out of that which is “as good as dead”. The gift of faith is God’s work that witnesses to the very God who “is able even to raise someone from the dead. In short, God’s invisible work of new creation becomes visible (incarnate) in the life of the one who trusts God. Therefore those who trust God belong to another realm and way of being moving forward to live as citizens of God’s kingdom because they see God’s presence and guidance which would not be visible to those without that trust. They can let go of conventional norms and values, or even lose social standing because they know they belong to a “better country”, that is God’s own. To Hebrew’s author to be a faithful servant of God one finds oneself an alien of sorts in this world. To be faithful is to be a least somewhat uncomfortable in whatever place one finds oneself. The faithful alien is always looking beyond his current “country” to another one—the one where God kingdom is on earth as well as in heaven. This idea of being an alien in this world because of trust in God can lead into a fruitful exploration of the dangers of feeling too settled in this world and its culture. After all, those whose hearts feel at home somewhere on this earth are vulnerable to adopting our adopted homes’ perspectives and behaviors. Our plot of ground, neighborhood, community, or even country can easily become the place where our loyalties and priorities lie. In exploring this idea, we must first look at ourselves because that is the most difficult place and it is all too easy to make judgements about the behaviors of others. In our culture it is hard to trust in the radical notion that it the ultimate reality is not what we can see, hear, touch or smell, but is what is most real is what is visible only through the eyes of faith, that our lives destination is a journey without “proofs”; it is a journey of not being sure where you are going, but going anyway. It is the interaction of trust and acting on that trust which strengthens faith and provides the sustaining nourishment we need. The title of this proclamation is “our unbelieving faith”. Each Sunday as a part of this service we affirm our faith through one of the documents the church has formed from those things revealed in scripture. However, the question about our faith is: how do we make it real; not just an intellectual concept, something we just say. Abraham’s faith was shown by the actions he took through trust. In the text read from the book of Isaiah we have an indictment against the people of Israel, not because they were affirming their faith through worship and ritual, but because that was the only place they affirmed it through the rituals they had been given. They did not practice obedience to God’s ways outside the rituals; they violated God’s instructions on how to behave toward others; how to care for all and be a true community where all received what they needed. It seems that God did not care for worship that did not find itself being lived in the life of the worshiper. Again, the examples of faith which we have not only from scripture but history, show us that trust in God which transforms the actions of the one trusting is where

faith can be seen...faith is made visible through the actions of the faithful. It is how God can be seen even in our broken world. It is by living into the relationship God has given us through the Word revealed, entrusting our lives to God's vision for this world by acting on the teachings of Christ that our faith demonstrates belief in what we affirm. This interaction transforms our unbelieving into true faith. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.