

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling  
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-13

*God of Hope, by faith we know that you created the world, and that what is seen is made by things that are not visible. Open our eyes to your presence among us that we may hear your word with clarity and a sureness of hope, as we follow you in all righteousness. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

## “Journey of Faith”

Earlier this month, there was a story in the news that a piece of the cross on which Jesus had supposedly been crucified was discovered in Turkey.

When discoveries like this are made, there’s always a bit of a hubbub about what it all means. I remember a few years ago when someone claimed to have discovered Jesus’ bones, there was much consternation about the earth shattering effect it would have on Christianity. Because after all, if Jesus rose bodily from the dead and ascended into heaven, just like the Apostle’s Creed said he did, his bones shouldn’t be left on earth. Which means if they were, then he didn’t really ascend, which could lead one to believe that if the ascension didn’t really happen, well maybe the resurrection didn’t either. Do you see where I’m going here? News stories like these can really hurt someone who needs facts and proof to define their faith.

And there are many people who do look for facts to define their faith. Which is not surprising because, after all, we live in an age of facts, of certainties or near certainties. With advances in technology and science happening at a rate so fast it’s hard to keep up, it often seems as if there is nothing we do not yet have an answer for or won’t have an answer for in the near future. Granted, there is not yet a cure for cancer, but some of us may agree that there will be one day. Some of us may believe that one day a person will land on Mars and, maybe, even live there awhile. Sound farfetched? Maybe. But I bet if we asked any of these children if they think it sounds farfetched, they would probably say no, because they’re being raised in age where science and technology have an answer for almost everything.

They’re also being raised (I think, though I don’t like to), in age when believing in God-let alone a God who was raised from the dead, seems quaint and naïve. Some may say it’s only a matter of time until such a belief will be put to rest because of advances in science and technology. It’s just a matter of time until someone finds Jesus’ real bones.

Some people, no doubt, find scientific discoveries or technological advances frightening. Religious fundamentalists who build their faith on proofs are probably threatened by such discoveries, because these discoveries can cause cracks in the foundation of their faith. For them, there’s no room in their walls of certainty for doubt.

But we are not fundamentalists. Because we know that, as Paul Tillich said, doubt is not the opposite of faith but an element of faith. Or, as Frederick Buechner once said, "Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process rather than as a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you're going, but going anyway. A journey without maps." (Wishful Thinking)

"Faith," as we hear it used in the Hebrews passage, invariably appears next to a verb. "By faith," someone did something. So it was with Abraham. By faith he obeyed by setting out to a strange and distant land. He began on a journey before he even knew the contours of the journey. He heard the voice of God, and he obeyed by going. He didn't go because he had scientific proof. He didn't go because he had all the information. In fact, by our standards, what Abraham did was a pretty foolish thing to do.

Abraham moved to a place he knew nothing about strictly on faith. There were no warranties, no guarantees, no bonuses to lure him except that he had faith in God. It would be the modern day equivalent of one of us packing up our possessions and family into a U-Haul and heading to an unknown destination because God told us to do so. Such an action would surely cause our friends and neighbors to gossip and wonder about us.

You see, in addition to Abraham not knowing where he was going; he didn't know if everything was going to be OK once he got there. In fact, he was guaranteed that he wouldn't see the fruition of his faith come to pass. But he journeyed because he had faith in God and God's promises.

Well, I would never take such a foolish risk, you may think. But we've all taken risks, and I don't mean calculated risks, such as investing in stocks rather than bonds. I mean real risks. Like moving to a new city where you know no one; or having or adopting children; or accepting a new job even though your current one suits you just fine; or getting married. Sometimes these things work out splendidly, but sometimes they don't. Sometimes they're bumps along the way, or real detours, or dead ends or cliffs. At times like this we need faith, and not a faith that is built on certainties or proofs, but faith based in real life experience, like the kind Abraham had, the kind that doubts and wavers and sometimes strays but always goes back, always returns to God because God can be trusted.

You see, Abraham was real, and so was his faith. His faith wasn't the heroic faith we make it out to be. It was real. For example, God sent him to Canaan, but when that didn't work out Abraham fled to Egypt. And then when that didn't work because he got kicked out, he decided to go back to Canaan and trust God's word.

But life wasn't always rosy in Canaan. There was trouble on the home front. His wife didn't get pregnant. So he got another woman pregnant, Hagar, and had a son with her. Well, you can imagine how well that went over with Sarah. So he decided once again to have faith in what God promised, and Sarah got pregnant after all.

So why is Abraham, who clearly made plenty of missteps along the way, considered a hero of our faith? I believe he's considered a hero because despite the twists and turns in the story, the endless waiting, and the multiple times Abraham gets frustrated with the plan and tries to take matters into his own hands, he always goes back to God, because God is faithful and can be trusted.

Friends, as someone once said, "faith is not intended for the times in life when dreams are achieved or when plans move along just as you intended. Faith is for the in-between times, the waiting times, the yearning-for-something times that last a lot longer than the successes and victories in our lives. These times are what connect us all to the father of our faith."

And so the point shouldn't be missed. Not only does faith start in the dark, with a word of command and not much more than that, but it continues in the dark, as decisions are made and "great things" just don't follow as a matter of course.

So much of our own journey of faith asks us to step out not knowing where we're going, but going anyway...without a roadmap or set of instructions. This is why Abraham is considered righteous. It wasn't because he was willing to follow a nice set of instructions God gave him, a "divine plan" if you will, but because he was willing to set out without those instructions. We don't know where God calls us to go, but we're still called to go, to begin the journey, to try new things, to continue the journey of faith, to be the people God calls us to be, even if we won't see the fruits of our labor come to fruition. Because faith is what we need when life does not give us what we want.

Faith is about finding a way through hard times, times when you want something very, very badly and you can't seem to get it. Faith is about the way people continue to function when they can't find a job or a person to spend their life with; it's about parents who maintain hope when their errant children can't seem to get on track, and it is about couples who want children and can't get pregnant. Faith is about how to live when answers do not come and when prayers seem to go unanswered, because faith is not an answer we have to find. Faith is a way of living; it is a mature understanding that sometimes the answers we want are not there when we want them.

That was true for Abraham and is true for us and has been true for everyone in between.

Because faith is not a noun; it's not something based on scientific facts or proof. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen.

Amen.

Sources:

<http://www.drbilllong.com/LectionaryII/Heb11II.html>

"The Substance of Hope", Adam H. Fronczek, Associate Pastor, Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Wishful Thinking, Frederick Buechner, "Faith"