

“The Assurance Of Things Hoped For”

Hebrew 11:1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.

Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.

By faith we understand

that the worlds were prepared by the word of God,
so that what is seen
was made from things that are not visible.

The Assurance Of Things Hoped For

Hebrews 11:1-3

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I.

Talk about the folly of best laid plans! When I sat down several months ago to plan the worship for this summer I chose today's passage from Hebrews 11 because I assumed it would be just about the easiest sermon topic for which one could hope. I mean, it is about *faith* after all. Which is something we talk about all the time and ever have in the forefront of our minds in our life together as a church. Moreover, one really only has to preach on this one simple sentence: "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*"

Unfortunately for me (and perhaps for all of you) this turned out to be *much* more difficult than I had imagined. At first, I thought it was a case of my mind being caught up in the lethargy of summer. Eventually, though, I had to admit the obvious: there is nothing easy, or clear cut about faith. It if was and if it is, then, almost by definition, it wouldn't be faith. (How would it be, how could it be?)

II.

When we first hear the words that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen," our immediate reaction is...*of course!* However, no sooner do those words start to sink in then the questions begin to bubble up. What *are* we sure of? Of what do we *need* to be sure? What *gives* us assurance, what is it that assures us? For what, which, and/or in whom, do we hope? What are our convictions? What is it that convicts us? What are these things we do *not* see, and will such things *always* remain unseen? All the while these questions were banging around in my head this week, circumstances conspired to challenge me to take 10,000 foot view of my ministry here in Canton as, this month, I begin my 28th year.

III.

Though I am not quite done with my analysis, I have come to a one immediate realization and conclusion: the mission creep and ministerial sprawl has become both unwieldy and untenable and, therefore, a radical simplification is required as I can no longer hold the tension between poles that are moving further from each other of their own accord and volition. In other words, the current situation calls for simplification.

Which, you will surely note as did I, dovetails nicely with this morning's sermon text from Hebrews 11: *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* I would like to suggest to you today that how one understands this important passage is predicated on one straightforward decision which all of us must make for ourselves (and keep making) about the nature and scope of faith. Not faith in general terms, but a decision about our *own* individual faith in specific: do we understand our faith to be the result of our works or, alternatively, God's grace?

IV.

The typical, knee-jerk reaction to such a question is that our faith is a gift to us made possible by God's grace alone. Not unsurprisingly, this is the appropriate theological and orthodox response. However, it is very often the case that well-intentioned and pious believers allow a "works mentality" to subvert and replace the "grace mentality" to which they otherwise ascribe.

So, for instance, faith becomes something we *have*, rather than what God *provides*. Faith changes from something *we* do, rather than what God does *through us*. Obedience to our faith becomes a measure of one's ability to, first, determine and then, later, adhere to rules, regulations, doctrine, and dogma, rather than allowing our faith to challenge such things; even disturbingly so. Faith becomes something which strives for *clarity* in a muddled world, rather than serve as the source of *kindness* to those whom the world seeks to muddle. Faith devolves to black or white, this or that, rather than evolving so as abide the gray.

V.

Moving, now, from the abstract to the actual let's return to Hebrews 11 vs. 1: *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* If we bring a "works mentality" to this passage we soon start to conclude that whatever assurance we have is but a function and measure of the faith we ourselves can muster. Correspondingly, that for which we might hope in the hidden hallways of our heart is limited to the depth and breadth of whatever faith we might manage to manifest. Moreover, a works mentality limits those things which we cannot see, (that which made all that *can* be seen) to the strength of our convictions, and in our ability to maintain and advance those convictions in a world which is very often hard, cold, unforgiving, and unrelenting.

Simply stated, when we allow our faith to correlate to our works, we reduce our assurance, our hope, and our convictions to those which are self-generative. In other words, all that assures us, all that we hope for, and all of our convictions arise from *within* us rather than *beyond* us; hence, there is very little room (or need) for God.

VI.

If, however, we approach Hebrews 11:1 through the eyes of a "grace mentality" where faith is seen not just *as* a gift but as *only* a gift, then there need be no lack in our assurance, no limit to those things for which we might hope, and no wavering of our convictions regardless of what we might struggle see or, even, remains stubbornly unseen. In other words, all that assures us, all that we hope for, and all of our convictions originate from *beyond* us, and are *not* dependent on us in *any* way. Faith is understood as a gift, not as a work.

Having said that, however, there is still an important role for works within a "Grace mentality." That is, as a *response* to the grace which God imparts to facilitate our faith. Grace is God's action, works our human reaction.

VII.

Fully aware that everything I have just said to you is fairly abstract and falls in the category of “that’s nice, Mike, but...”, I would like to leave you today with a few real world examples of a “grace-mentality” being made manifest, and the kind of faith such grace bestows.

When grace enters into our lives we almost always surprised or taken aback by both the magnitude and majesty of that grace, and by our recognition that we scarcely deserve the beauty and wonder such grace imparts. If you want a real world example of this, take a few minutes today pondering the glorious gift that is Rosemary’s Garden in front of the main entrance of the church. While always beautiful, this year the garden is *particularly* magnificent. It is a riot of color which, while clearly ordered and purposeful, has been set loose to spill out vertically and horizontally with an almost reckless abandon blending a mix of hues, shapes, and smells. It is truly the assurance of things which are far more than we ever would, or could, hope for.





Pat

Susan (w/Lew)

VIII.

Both Linda and I have had the great pleasure, usually on a Farmers' Market day, of being queried by community members or those visiting the area, as to who is responsible for the garden, as they are completely bowled over and in awe of the garden. It is our delight to tell them that it is a gracious gift given through the faithfulness of Faye Bartley, along with Pat Mace and, this year, Susan Akins as an expression of their conviction of things not seen.

IX.

As I neared the end of my vacation last week I was made aware that Shirley Norton, a dear and beloved pillar of our church, was nearing the end of her 94 year journey through this world. Thankful for the opportunity to visit and pray with her during these last days, I planned to go to see her the following day. I then contacted Pastor Donna Doig to give her an update on Shirley and I offered to pick her up the next morning that, together, we might go visit Shirley; her long-time and very dear friend.

We arrived to find Shirley alert and interactive, though clearly winding down. Each of us were very aware this would almost certainly be the last time we would see each other on this earth, that we had come to say good-bye to her, and to tell her that we love her. Following a pleasant conversation we prayed together. Then I stepped away from the bedside to give Shirley and Donna some privacy to offer final words to each other; all the while holding each other's hand. While I did not hear what was said, nor did I attempt to, I clearly took note of this being another privileged instance of one of the most wonderful things I have witnessed in 30 years of ministry: the tenderness of cherished female friendships and the ways in which women care for each other as they share their assurance of things mutually hoped for and their conviction of things not seen.



Shirley Norton



Shirley with partner in crime
Joyce Bell at Bazaar Candy table



Shirley with Christa
in the kitchen



Fred & Sandy
Pollard (front pew)

Shirley Norton,
Joyce Bell,
& Marilyn Coir
(back pew)

X.

Finally, I would share with you something that happened in our church well over a decade ago. While I certainly was aware of and involved in the larger context, I only recently learned of this particular and, heretofore, unknown aspect of the story. A gentleman in our congregation was diagnosed with a very aggressive terminal illness. Because this was occurring so quickly the circumstances allowed for him to be cared for at home by his wife; with support from their family and Hospice. As the days and weeks passed, however, the responsibility began to exact a heavy toll on the wife as one would expect. Of all of this I had been aware.

What I did not know, however, was that at some point another church member, Sandy Pollard, arrived at their home unannounced, told the wife she was a nurse by training, and offered to sit with her husband so she could get some much needed rest. Tenderly relating this many years after the fact, the wife shared it was the most unexpected and gracious gift she ever received.



Sandy (purple),
Shirly (red),
Donna (blue robe)

Fred & Sandy
Pollard (right)

Sandy in the
kitchen
(left)

XI.

While it is certainly understandable that many come to faith seeking certainty, the only assurance that faith provides is of things hoped for and unseen. Like a church member arriving at your door to offer a gift of grace to you and your family which flows out from the faith that God has graciously placed within them. Such care is not a “work” of faith but, rather, it is a response to the grace that God has given and, now, is at work in each of us. Amen.