

Of Things Seen and Unseen
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 &
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20
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I love this passage from Hebrews. I love the simplicity of the definition of faith in the first verse of chapter eleven. I love the illustration of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Jacob, as shining examples of what it means to live by faith, in assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. I think I might make this passage into a magnet and place it on my refrigerator, along with the pictures of my friends' children, the wedding invitations and the YMCA class schedule. I think I'll place it in a central location that is easy to see, and to see often. While I wait for my coffee to brew in the morning, I can stare at this passage and think about the courage, trust and hope that Abraham and his family showed when they set out from their earthly homeland, in a pilgrimage towards a new, heavenly home that would not be reached in their lifetimes. While I wait for the pasta water to boil in the evenings, I can think about what it means to live toward something that I cannot see and wonder how I can better look through or past or beyond the earthly real estate that takes so much of my time and energy. I can even imagine walking into my kitchen in the middle of the night, woken up by a siren blaring, or a nightmare, or the restless insomnia that sometimes grips, to pour a glass of cold water and look again at this magnet and think of how Abraham and his descendants died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance greeted them, nonetheless.

It is this last image, especially, that sticks with me. This vision of a faithful group of people, smiling in their dying moments as they look into the distance where the promises of God

await them. After a life lived as strangers in a strange land, gone from the home they once knew, seeking something that they could not see or touch or even describe, but knowing that when they got there, they would recognize it. A new homeland, a heavenly city, constructed by God, brick by brick, stone upon stone, with no cracked sidewalks, no flooded subways, no hospitals, no police stations, no soup kitchens, no rehabilitation clinics, no cancer centers. No war, no sickness, no addiction, no conflict. Yet while they journeyed on this pilgrimage toward their inheritance, Abraham and his family must have encountered each of these, for their journey was anything but easy. They must have experienced moments of doubt, of anger, of loneliness, questioning God and wishing they had just stayed at home.

There is a sense in reading this passage that the author is retelling this Genesis story to a group of people who need to hear this remarkable illustration of faith, who crave a story to remind them of why they are in community in the first place, why they have gathered together in the name of the risen Christ. The Letter to the Hebrews, in fact, is not a letter at all, and it is not addressed to a Jewish community. It is, according to Tom Long, a sermon, written by an unnamed author/preacher to an early Christian congregation with whom he is familiar, and to a congregation in the midst of a spiritual crisis. By reading through the whole of this very long sermon, it becomes clear, Long states, that this is a congregation who is tired. Tired of serving the world; tired of worship; tired of Christian education; tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society; tired of the spiritual struggle; tired of trying to keep their prayer life going; and tired even of Jesus. They have lost their confidence in this endeavor and are about ready to abandon the faith, to return to the simplicity of what came before Christ, return to familiar practices and rituals that required less investment. They cannot see beyond their exhaustion, and so have lost the spirit to persevere.¹

Now, I know that we are in better shape than the congregation to whom this sermon is preached. We are a growing, vibrant, spiritually invigorated group of folks who are psyched about Christian Education, who attend worship regularly and who are committed to engagement with the world. Every Sunday when we file into this space, or into the Sanctuary, there is practically a physical vibration, an electric hum of excitement and commitment to this Christian endeavor. We do not harbor any illusions about the difficulty that sometimes comes with the Christian life and living according to a Savior who not only lived for us, but suffered and died in agony. This is not a fairytale story with no strings attached. We do not have any preconceived notions of joining a church and receiving automatic access to the easy life of salvation. And yet, we are literally bursting at the seams with new members. We are bucking the trend in the American religious landscape, not by taking the easy way, not by any false advertising, but by thoughtful, theological engagement, both in worship and education.

But, for all this growth and energy, we are not so dissimilar to the audience of this sermon. We know what it feels like to be profoundly tired. I would guess that on certain Sunday mornings, you are so worn out from the week, that it is a triumph to have made it here at all. And just wait until the fall programming begins, and school is back in session, and the committees and governing bodies of this congregation begin their monthly meetings. Of course we know what it feels like to be tired of serving the world; tired of worship; tired of Christian education; tired of trying to keep our prayer life going; tired even of Jesus. And if this is not the case for you; if you come here on Sunday mornings feeling rested and full of energy, let me suggest some committees that are looking for new members!

All kidding aside, our stories resonate with that early Christian community, and with Abraham and his family before them. We know pilgrimage, we know struggle, we know

exhaustion. And the preacher of this sermon in Hebrews delivers the real goods. He does this, not by offering programmatic changes, or encouraging conflict management. He does not consider altering the forms of worship to be more hip and easy to digest. Rather, he preaches to the congregation in sophisticated theological terms about the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ and about the nature and meaning of faith.² And this sermon, while highly theological, is not meant to be doctrinal, it is meant to be helpful, to be rest to the weary, nourishment to the spiritually starved, clarity to the confused. And this preacher knows that high-minded dogmatics are not going to turn this congregation around and point them back to the proper path. What they need is recognition of their exhaustion, comfort in the face of their distress, not through sappy self-help maxims or long-winded, sleep inducing theological reasoning, but through the reality of Jesus Christ, and the continuity of God's promise, through both the Old and New Testaments, from the beginning through the consummation of human history.

And it is enough to consider this small slice of faith, for now, for this morning, for these few moments. Enough to ponder this definition, whittled down to fifteen words, illustrated by this familiar story of pilgrimage.

This brief definition tells us so much about faith. It tells us that faith is forward looking, oriented toward the future. Faith anticipates something to be revealed, even if we don't know exactly what it is. In other words, faith is hope. And faith believes that God will keep God's promises. In other words, faith is trust. Our hope and trust in God, in that which we cannot see, is active, mutual and participatory. In other words, faith is not blind obedience or passive submission to God. In the passage that Joan read for us this morning, we hear Isaiah chastising people for misunderstanding what faith is and what faith requires. The audience to whom Isaiah prophesies live as if blind obedience and passive submission through empty ritual are enough to

get by, enough to receive God's promises, without making too much effort. They lack the total investment of body, mind and spirit in a relationship with their Creator. Yet God keeps after them, calls them back, saying, "Let us argue it out" or "Let us reason together." That is the mutuality of faith that Abraham demonstrates, that the preacher of Hebrews reminds his congregation of. God is not waiting for us at the finish line, dangling a carrot to keep us on the path, sending us visions of a heavenly Jerusalem that we can only reach when we've run the course. Faith as the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen is both a future and present reality. God is both a future and present reality. Our confidence, trust and hope in tomorrow gird us for today and grant us glimpses of where we're headed, even as hell seems to break loose all around us: the bridge collapse in Minneapolis; the tornado in Brooklyn; the coal mine explosion in Utah; the violence in Iraq; the poverty on our streets; climate change visible to the naked eye. Addiction, sickness, mental illness, and death distract us. We are losing faith in the world around us and the world is closing in on us.

Chaos swirls around us like the sands of a desert storm, and the visibility decreases to almost nil. We cannot see. Yet faith persists.

Frederick Buechner, in his new book, *Secrets in the Dark*, says this about faith in the midst of chaos:

By faith we understand, if we are to understand it at all, that the madness and lostness we see all around us and within us are not the last truth about the world but only the next to last truth... Faith is the eye of the heart, and by faith we see deep down beneath the face of things- by faith we struggle against all odds to be able to see- that the world is God's creation even so. It is God who made us and not we ourselves, made us out of God's peace to live in peace, out of God's light to dwell in light, out of God's love to be, above all things, loved and loving. That is the last truth about the world.³

We are not without glimpses of that last truth; we are not stuck in those swirling winds of sand with nothing to comfort us. We have glimpses of that peace, light, and love- glimpses of our

inheritance even in the storm of chaos, even as the sands persist. And this is where the story of Abraham brings us back.

Abraham set out for a place that he was to receive from God as an inheritance; and that is what he did. Abraham packed up his life, set out with his family into the unknown, with absolutely no idea what would come next or where he would end up, knowing only that God had made a promise and Abraham trusted that promise, finding the way through the storms with the eyes of his heart. With that same trust, that same faith, Abraham stayed in that promised land, but not as a resident, but as a foreigner and stranger, a squatter on the land that God had promised to him. Likewise after him, his sons camped out, with the confidence in a trustworthy God who would come through, in God's time. And they knew that what God promised, God delivered. And so they waited, Abraham, his children, and those after. Through the chaos, the madness and the lostness. They died, still with the assurance that God would uphold God's end of the deal, and convinced that what awaited them would be extraordinary. Died with a smile on their faces.

And they died not in a faith of blind obedience or passive submission to God's will. For if they had been thinking of all that they left behind, they could have returned. But they made a choice, entered into a relationship with God in a faith of trust and hope, mutuality and participation, a present and future reality. And through the hardship of living as strangers in a strange land, they kept their eye on the prize, the unseen 'better country.' The heavenly country. And by faith they lived as strangers and foreigners on earth. The future reality toward which they moved made relative all goals, values, and relationships in their present reality.

And so now do we- leave behind what we know, what we can see, what drags us down and deadens our spirits; we set out on a journey, moving towards a destination that we know will

be everything God promised, even if we don't know what it will look like. But we know that it will be home. Abraham and Sarah did not see the last and deepest truth of God in its fullness any more than we have, but they spent their lives homesick for it. And so shall we.

¹ Tom Long. *Hebrews: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997.

² *Ibid.*

³ Frederick Buechner. *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, p. 71.