

August 7, 2022  
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Pentecost 9  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Blessed Assurance”**

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

I do not like surprises when I travel. As I was planning this summer’s vacations, I planned our trips so that I knew the exact routes we would be driving, the location of rest stops and gas stations along the way, and the hotels where we would be staying. Once we arrive at our evening’s destination, I would consult the list of restaurants I had compiled to find a suitable place for that night’s dinner. I program my GPS so that I know how many kilometers we will be travelling and the approximate time of our arrival. While I accept that there will be unexpected surprises (construction, traffic delays, detours, etc.), I try to be as certain as possible so that there are no unpleasant occurrences along our journey and that we arrive in the exact place where we have planned to visit.

So, I do not know how I would have responded if I were in Abraham’s position when the Lord called him to *“go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”* (Genesis 12:1). We know very little about Abraham (originally known as Abram, “exalted father”). He was the son of Terah and the brother of Nahor and Haran; their hometown was “Ur of the Chaldeans,” a Mesopotamian city in modern-day Iraq. The family was nomadic, travelling along the Fertile Crescent trading route which brought them northwest of their hometown to the city of Haran. It was a well-travelled and familiar trading route in the ancient world, one that the family had probably travelled many times. There would have been few surprises every time they set out from Ur to travel along with their families, which in Abram’s case included his wife Sarai, who the Bible reports *“was barren; she had no child.”* (Genesis 11:30).

But all of this changed when the Lord called Abram to leave behind everything that was safe and familiar to travel to *“the land that I will show you.”* The Lord provides Abram with no details of this destination; he is not told where he will be travelling nor how long the journey will be. He is not warned of any dangers along the route, or where he and his entourage will find food, water, and shelter. What the Lord does tell Abram is what God will provide for him and his descendants:

- “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” – Genesis 12:2-3.

The Lord promises Abram that his descendants will become a great and blessed nation, and through them the blessing will be extended to all families and all nations. This covenant promise is repeated in today’s First Lesson, where the Lord brought Abram outside and said to him, “*look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them ... so shall your descendants be.*” (Genesis 15:5). The covenant with Abram will become the foundation of the nation of Israel, through whom the child of Mary will be born to fulfill the promise of one who will be the Saviour of all nations – but the fulfillment of this covenant promise depends on Abram’s response. The Lord is calling him to leave behind everything that is safe and familiar, leave behind his home and family, and to trust in the Lord to guide him to the land of promise and the fulfillment of God’s covenant. Will Abram trust in the Lord and God’s promises, or will he choose to continue in his present circumstances and a life with few surprises, living out his days in familiar surroundings?

Abram makes a choice: “*So Abram went, as the LORD had told him ...*” (Genesis 12:4). Abram chooses to trust in God’s Word and God’s promises to guide him along unfamiliar paths. Abram chooses to put his trust and faith in the Lord; and because of this, he is known to us as “Abraham,” the “father of a multitude.” Because Abraham chose to place his faith in God, he became the instrument through which God’s promises were fulfilled and a role model for all generations of faith which is “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” (Hebrews 11:1).

The Letter to the Hebrews is unique among the twenty-one epistles of the New Testament. It is an anonymous letter (earlier scholars believed it was written by Paul, but few hold to this opinion today). Its style is more like a sermon than a letter, beginning not with the usual greeting and thanksgiving but with the statement that “*long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.*” (1:1-2). As the name of the epistle implies, its audience is Jewish Christians, and the language of the letter includes many references to the Old Testament and language that would be familiar to a Jewish audience. It often refers to Jesus as a High Priest, proclaiming that “*we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one*

*who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.*” (4:15) and encourages its readers to *“hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”* (10:23). It ends with the benediction that *“the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”* (13:20-21).

Perhaps the most famous portion of the Letter to the Hebrews is its teaching on faith in the eleventh chapter. The eighteen appearances of the phrase “by faith” constitute an *anaphora*, a rhetorical device in which a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of successive clauses. An *anaphora* is used to make an impact on memory in teaching, impresses listeners when used in an *encomium* (catechism), and has cumulative effect when employed in argumentation. Martin Luther used *anaphora* in the *Small Catechism*, where he begins his explanation of each of the Ten Commandments with the phrase *“we are to fear and love God ...”*

- “Hebrews 11 is rightfully known as the ‘hall of fame of faith.’ The chapter is an intricate, carefully structured, and sustained reflection on the nature and function of faith, highlighting exemplars of faith from Israel’s history.” – Christopher T. Holmes.

The author begins this chapter with two affirmations that inform and focus the recital that follows: the nature of faith and the approval of God on the life that was determined by such faith. In the previous chapter, “faith” (*pistis*) is presented in a context of related concepts such as assurance, endurance, and firm hope in promises from which people of God do not shrink back:

- “For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet ‘in a little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.’ But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.” – 10:36-39.

This faith is defined by the author as *“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* (11:1). “Assurance” (*hypostasis*) points to a reality that does not owe its existence to human awareness. It denotes something that is real,

tangible, or objective, in contrast to something illusory or intangible. It is the quality of faith as the substance of hope, the proof of what was yet to come. Faith is also “conviction” (*elegchos*), presenting or proving as true that which cannot be seen. It harkens back to the creation story, in which God’s powerful and creative word brings into existence things that previously were not visible, so that God’s people in every generation may have the assurance and conviction that *“faith rests in our taps into the really real or hoped-for things; it leads to conviction and action in the visible world, even though it is rooted in things that cannot be seen.”* (Holmes).

It was through this faith that *“our ancestors received approval”* (11:2). It was this quality of faith as the substance of hope, the proof of what was yet to come, that brought approval (confirmation) from the ancients, our ancestors in the long narrative of trust in God. The approval they received is literally “received testimony”; their lives are in the biblical record and lives of faith. That the Scripture bears witness to them is the equivalent of saying that God testifies to their faithfulness, a faith that we share as *“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”* (11:3). The belief that the Word of God brought into being the universe is a tenet of faith, which is proof of the unseen, *“the idea of God’s creation, not as a one-time act at the beginning of time, but as God’s ongoing effort to uphold and even restore the world.”* (Holmes).

To illustrate how this faith impacts the lives of God’s people in previous generations, the author presents a “roll call” of faithful ancestors from the Old Testament, which is presented as God’s testimony about their lives. In our Gospel lesson for this Sunday, the focus is on Abraham and Sarah, specifically on Abraham’s response to God’s call to the life of a stranger in the land of promise and Abraham and Sarah’s receiving the gift of promised heirs. Abraham’s example highlights the active or dynamic nature of faith, an orientation that leads to decisive action when there is not tangible or visible support for that action. The faith that is exemplified by Abraham and all these ancestors of faith *“is forward looking, oriented toward the future, trusting that God will keep promises made to those who believe. Faith and hope are one, and life is a pilgrimage”* (Fred Craddock).

Abraham’s faith is expressed in obedience: *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for the place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”* (11:8). Obedience to God’s call is a quality that Abraham shares with both Christ and Christ’s followers:

- “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.” – 5:7-10.

It was not until he arrived in Canaan that Abraham was told of the place of his inheritance: “*By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.*” (11:9). While this would become the land upon which the descendants of Abraham, the people of Israel, would reside, Abraham also knew that God’s promise was far greater than a temporal dwelling place: “*For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*” (11:10). In contrast to a tent home, the image of life that is temporary and vulnerable, Abraham anticipated a city, permanent and with a sure foundation, the city of God in which God’s people will dwell in peace and security (“*For here we have no everlasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*” – 13:14). The city of God is the hope and goal of all pilgrims of faith, the people who “*make it clear that they are seeking a homeland*” (11:14).

The second movement in the Abraham story centres on the birth of Isaac and through Isaac a promised progeny beyond number: “*By faith he received the power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised.*” (11:11). The seeming impossibility of the fulfillment of this promise occurs when the Lord visits Abraham and Sarah as they encamp under the oaks of Mamre, where the Lord’s declaration that “*I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son*” (Genesis 18:10) is met by Sarah’s laughter at the absurdity of such an announcement: “*After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure? ... Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?*” (18:12-13). But the birth of the child that will begin the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises answers the Lord’s question “*is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.*” (18:14). Because of God’s faithfulness in fulfilling this seemingly impossible promise “*therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’*” (11:12). This extraordinary consequence flowed from a faith that trusted God as the keeper of promises.

The author concludes this section on the faith of Abraham by reflecting on “all of these,” a likely reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the pilgrim patriarchs. Even though “*all of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.*” (11:13). The homeland they see from a distance is one seen with eyes of faith; it was this vision by faith that empowered them to live not only as “*strangers and foreigners on the earth*” but to confess publicly that such was their life: “*All the ancients of faith were anticipating and moving toward a homeland, a better country, which made only relatively important the actual land in which they lived.*” (Craddock). Because these faithful pilgrims chose God’s approval over that of the society about them, “*God is not ashamed to be called their God*” (11:16). In the city that God has prepared for them, the pilgrims will finally know the permanence that tent life never afforded.

- “Therefore conduct yourselves as guests and strangers in this strange land and strange inn, and take nothing from it but food and drink, clothing and shoes, and what you need for your night’s rest, and keep your thoughts on your fatherland where you are citizens ... our true fatherland where there is nothing but security, peace, rest, and joy forevermore.” – Martin Luther, 1531.

The gift of faith that provides us with assurance and conviction does not offer us a “crystal ball” that reveals exactly what we may encounter, nor does it offer us a choice in the paths that we will follow. In his call to Peter to “feed my sheep,” Jesus warns his apostle that “*when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go*” (John 21:18). Jesus warns his would-be followers that “*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Matthew 16:24); it means following the example of Abraham and our ancestors in faith in living by faith, trusting that God will lead us “*in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake*” (Psalm 23), that even though we may not know where we are going we live in trust and hope that our Lord knows the way, for we have faith in the one who promises us that “*I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me.*” (John 14:6).

- “Faith is not simply the belief that there is a God but trust that God rewards those who seek him. Faith has a long memory and profits from the experience of our forebears. Faith also hopes, looking beyond the immediate to God’s future. Faith is tenacious and enduring, able to accept promises deferred by the conviction that death itself does not annul God’s promises ... Faith is

subjective, to be sure, a conviction firmly held, but it is not solely subjective, since it is the substance, the essence, the very being of things hoped for.” – Craddock.

As much as I strive for certainty in planning our travels to reduce the number of unexpected surprises, I have also learned that *“life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”* (John Lennon). When we are called to follow Jesus, we are also called to have faith that even though we may not know where we are going, we have the blessed assurance that our Lord is always with us, that our Good Shepherd will lead us and guide us through whatever challenges and difficulties we may face and lead us one day to our eternal home. We live with the same assurance and conviction that gave Abraham the confidence to step out in faith, trusting in God’s promises, so that through him all of us are blessed children of God. We can live every day in trust and hope that even though we may not know where we are going nor what the future may hold for us, because of our faith in the gracious promises of God we have the confidence that as *“grace has brought me safe thus far – grace will lead me home.”*

Amen.