

**"What Is Faith?"**  
**Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Lectionary Year C**  
**August 8, 2010**  
**Texts: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-19; Luke 12:32-40**  
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What is faith? We talk about it a lot, and like many other words we use within the church, we assume we know what we are talking about when we use it.

I was told a joke the other day that I want to share with you. It turns out that Jesus comes back to earth, and as soon as he does he encounters a man sitting in his car crying. Jesus asks the man what's wrong, and the man tells the Lord he is terminally ill. Jesus says to him, "Just have faith; you will be made well. Just have faith."

Jesus next encounters a woman on the street. She, too, is crying. Jesus inquires about her difficulty. She tells him that she has lost her job. Jesus says to her, "Just have faith; your problems will be taken care of. Just have faith." Jesus then encounters a husband and wife sitting on a park bench. They, like the others, are crying, and Jesus asks them what they are crying about. They tell him, "We have a teenage daughter." Jesus just sits down next to them and starts crying too.

Do we really know what faith is? Sometimes we can get into trouble when we assume too much, especially when we assume that everyone understands the meaning of all the words we use. I don't want to assume anything when it comes to matters of faith, not even that all of us here understand what faith is.

So I want to spend our time together today addressing the question of the nature and character of faith. The passages of scripture from the lectionary that we are presented with this morning are full of descriptions and pictures of faith. If we are looking for answers to the question, "What is faith?" these passages offer us a number of possible "faith is" statements we can make. I would like to share these statements with you and expound briefly on each of them.

**Faith is realizing only God is God** (Isaiah 1:1, 10-20). When we read the prophets, it becomes clear in a hurry that the people of ancient Israel had the mistaken notion that their fate as a nation rested on their power. In this particular passage from Isaiah, it seems that the people have had the audacity to decide for themselves what kind of worship is suitable to God, without bothering to check with God on that. So the Lord reminds them that only he gets to make that decision, and as it turns out, he seems to be more concerned about what goes on at the courthouse and in corporate board meetings and during political gatherings than he is about what goes on in the

sanctuary, because it is in those places where people are being abused and oppressed, where there is more injustice than good going on. We tend not to see things that way when we don't let God be God. Faith is trusting in God more than in ourselves alone.

**Faith is not the same as sight** (Hebrews 11:1-3). Faith is not the same thing as seeing. Faith means perceiving what is not seen. As the writer of Hebrews states, faith "is the conviction of things not seen." If we could see our way clearly in a given situation, if there were absolutely no obstructions in our line of sight as we look toward the future, we would not need faith. But such is not the case. Therefore, faith always involves stepping out into the darkness and taking a chance. Faith involves risk.

This does not mean that faith is blindness. We are not asked to have blind faith. As our friend, David Matthews, describes it, we are called to have "one-eyed faith," faith that is willing to step out in action without a completely clear field of vision. As Paul states it, "for we see in a mirror, dimly . . ."

**Faith is obedience to the call of God** (Hebrews 11:8). Faith means that we obey God. We do what God would have us do. We put our trust in God's will for us. This is what Abraham and Sarah did. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, "By faith they obeyed when they were called . . ."

The call of God doesn't mean necessarily that God wants you to be a missionary on the other side of the world or even the pastor of a local church. But I believe God is calling each of us to serve him in some way—at work, at home, with friends or colleagues, and in the church. God calls each of us to seek ways to be like Christ and to demonstrate Christlike love, in whatever situation we find ourselves in. That's really how the world around us comes to know Jesus.

**Faith is not the same as knowledge** (Hebrews 11:8). We trust in God even if we do not fully understand what God wants for us. As this passage from Hebrews reminds us, Abraham and Sarah did not know where they were going. We don't have to understand or comprehend fully to have faith. Faith is not mental assent; it is not dead certainty. That's because the things of God are a mystery. It is trusting on the basis of what we know already with the hope that we will come to know more as we walk in faith. As I have said before, in the Bible there is more doing that leads to knowing than knowing that leads to doing.

**Faith is trusting in God to make possible what may seem impossible to us** (Hebrews 11:11-12, 19). The passage from Hebrews also reminds us that Abraham and Sarah had a child when they were well past the usual age for conception. They were too old, and Sarah was too barren to have a child. Yet a child was born to the couple, and through that child the promises of God were fulfilled.

Nothing is impossible for God. God brings new life from barrenness and resurrection from death. Faith in this God means being open to new possibilities. It means being open-minded, flexible, willing to change. It means trusting in a God who is not limited or restricted to anything.

**Faith is trusting in God even when we are tested by life** (Hebrews 11:17). Life will test and try our faith. The Hebrews passage goes on in the verse following our reading to recall that Abraham was tested when God commanded him to offer up his only son. Faith means trusting in God even when it is not easy to do so. There are times when the experiences of life make us question the goodness of God and the level of our faith. We need to have faith not just when things are going our way. We are to have faith in the valley of bad experiences as well as the mountaintop of warm, fuzzy feelings.

**Faith is trusting in God's providence so that we are not unduly afraid** (Luke 12:32). If we have faith we are not overly serious about things. Isn't it true that we spend a lot of time worrying and being afraid? Sometimes it seems we are afraid enough of living that if we were given a choice, we might choose to be old so that we could look back on our life rather than forward to it in fear. But Jesus tells his disciples and us over and over again, "Fear not." Through faith we know that we are in God's hands. We will be safe. God will provide for us.

**Faith is trusting in God more than possessions** (Luke 12:33). Our faith must be in God and not in the things of this world. Our security comes only from him. In fact, Jesus tells his disciples to sell their possessions and give to the poor. Why? Because the things of this world simply do not last. Faith in possessions always will leave us empty and wanting more. Instead of being preoccupied with gaining the things of this world, we should be oriented toward gaining the things of God. Jesus tells his disciples here to work toward making an unfailing treasure in heaven. It is there, in the things of God, where our treasure and our heart should be.

**Faith is watchfully waiting in readiness for the coming of the Lord** (Luke 12:35-40). Faith is living with the end in view. It means we trust that history will find its conclusion in God. Just as everything begins with God, it will end with God. Our trust can be in nothing less than or other than God, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending of everything. Jesus instructs his disciples to be dressed for action and be ready for his coming. We also are to live with eager anticipation of the Lord's future. Faith is the assurance not only that our history is moving toward God, but that God's history is moving toward us.

Now that we have looked at these "faith is" statements from today's lectionary texts and talked about them a little, I want to leave

you this morning with a picture of faith that has stuck with me ever since my Baylor days. A friend of mine suggested to me then that we tend to imagine that a relationship with Christ is like this: I'm driving in my car down the highway, and I see Jesus along the side of the road. I stop to pick him up by telling him where I am going and inviting him to come along with me. He agrees, and we ride off together toward my destination with him as my companion. Many of us picture a relationship with the Lord in this kind of way. He rides shotgun for us.

However, my friend went on to explain that a better picture of what a relationship with Christ looks like is this: I'm driving in my car down the highway, and I see Jesus along the side of the road. I go to offer him a ride, but instead of getting in on the passenger side, he comes around the front of the car to the driver's side. He kindly asks me to scoot over. Then he takes the wheel, and we go where he decides we should.

Do you see the difference? To have faith means to trust only in God. It is this kind of faith that characterized Abraham and Sarah and our other Old Testament forebears. It is this kind of faith in God and not in ourselves that Isaiah called Israel to. It is this kind of faith without fear that Jesus urged his followers to have. To the extent that we trust only in God and allow him to lead and guide us, molding and shaping our lives, to this extent we have faith.