**Hebrews 11:1-2,8-10,16 (Full reading: vv. 1-3,8-16)** August 7, 2022

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*Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. 2This is what the ancients were commended for…*

*8By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God…*

*16Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Christian, Live Beyond What You See!**

You, your spouse and a couple kids, in the prime of life, are bumping along a lonely thousand mile track across the prairie. All your earthly belongings, including food, are in a wagon about the size of a pickup bed. Days are hot, water limited, armed attacks possible. Health care does not exist. In a day or two you expect to see the mountains on the horizon. Who knows what they’ll bring! Then there are the snows. Will you make it in time?

Why are you doing this? It’s because of what you expect, have been told about at the other end.

Of course, what the pioneers found wasn’t always what was promised. A couple decades after the wagons crossed the prairies, homesteaders were still headed west on railroads. One place a few headed for was Boise City, Oklahoma—today it’s the last incorporated town at the end of the Oklahoma panhandle. They named it Boise City because in French, *boise* means trees. (Everything sounds exotic in French.) Farmland and trees. What’s not to love! Immigrants and others in hard straits in the eastern cities were sold cheap land and cheap train tickets by land speculators to settle the area around Tree City. When they stepped off the train, there wasn’t a tree to be seen. You see, the name “Boise City” was a marketing ploy. (from *The Worst Hard Time*)

Pilgrim—you—can you trust the promises?

The book of Hebrews was written to Christians having their doubts about God’s promises. The promised land of the Christian faith wasn’t looking so promising. They were thinking about turning back.

So what was going on? Well, we’re not real sure to whom this book of the Bible called Hebrews was written. The title “Hebrews” is put on this letter because, the best we can piece together, it was written to Christians of Jewish ancestry. These Christians were pioneers, first generation believers, and they were thinking about going back to the Jewish faith of their ancestors.

You see, they had put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah promised in their own Hebrew Bibles. But as of late, their new Christian faith was bringing trouble. We don’t know the details. We don’t know how widespread or long term the persecution was. But we do know, from chapter ten, that some of them had property confiscated, others were publicly humiliated (which involved more than mere name-calling), and others were put in prison, because they were Christian.

Meanwhile the Jewish faith was legally permitted and protected by the Roman authorities. So these Christians of Jewish descent thought, “Well, if Jesus is just a fulfillment of the Jewish faith, why not go back to the safety of Judaism?” We can sympathize with safety, right? Especially when it’s not just you, but also the wife and kids who get caught in the crossfire.

But Jesus had warned about all this. He had said, *“Whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven”* (Mt 10:33). That warning weighed heavily on the author of this letter. Understandable or not, these people were putting their eternity on the line! He had to warn them. By the Holy Spirit, we have this most beautiful chapter of the Bible on what being a Christian looks like. It comes down to faith. We are saved through faith. Without faith, you don’t have anything. Don’t abandon the faith!

Now this reading doesn’t tell us everything about faith. It doesn’t tell us the stuff you are supposed to believe to have saving faith. The rest of the book of Hebrews lays that out. The chapter right before our reading tells us, *“We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”* That’s what the book of Hebrews is about: Jesus the *only and all-sufficient* Savior for all people. That’s the core of the Christian faith. It has to be. It always will be. *This* reading doesn’t talk so much about the content of faith as the attitude, the disposition of true faith. If faith is a suitcase, we’re not going to talk about what’s in the suitcase, but what that suitcase looks like.

These Christian pilgrims in an unfriendly world were asking, “How firmly do I have to subscribe to that faith? Can’t knowledge of Jesus my Savior just be a fact, like ‘What’s the capital of New Mexico?’ that I just keep locked up in my heart and no one ever has to find out about?” Well, Hebrews 11 explains that Christian faith can’t be that way.

So, how do you convey what faith should look like and feel like?

Think about the world of sports for a moment. When a coach wants to get his team ready their upcoming game, he could explain what the other team does, “They come up to the line, their wide receivers line up here and run this route…” and his players would sort of get the idea. That’s not what coaches do. What they do is show a highlight film. They want their players to see what it really looks like in a real life game.

Chapter 11 of Hebrews is a highlight film about faith. It isn’t an instruction manual about how faith should be bold, brave, sincere and consistent. That’s good and true. This chapter shows us the highlight reel of people of true faith.

The highlight reel takes us to a dwelling where a man and his wife are loading up all their belongings—kind of like the pioneers, only they are loading camels instead of ox-drawn wagons. Family, friends, life-long acquaintances gather around to see them off. The couple are wealthy. They don’t *need* to be doing this. You go over and ask them, “What are you doing?” “We’re moving.” “Why?” “The Lord God told us to.” “So where are you moving to?” “We have no idea.” “You’re leaving today and don’t know where you’re going? Are you nuts?” “No. The Lord told us to go. He said he would… in fact, this is what he said, *‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.’* So we are going.*”* “That’s it!” “Yep.”

***“By faith…”*** Note that word! ***“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going”*** (8). Abraham trusted what God said. And he acted on it. He had a conviction that whatever God said is true, it exists even though he had never seen it.

You see, faith is not what most people think it is. Some think faith is optimism. “It’ll all work out. Don’t worry. Have faith.” No. Others think faith is a sort of bravery: “He has faith! He doesn’t worry about what will happen. He just goes ahead and does it!” That’s not faith, at least the sort Hebrews 11 is talking about. And there are a lot more wrong ideas about what Christian faith is.

By faith Abraham went. God talked; he did. When Abraham got to the promised land, do you know what the *very first* thing the Bible says? *“At that time the Canaanites were in the land.”* I don’t know what Abraham expected, but I would have kind of expected a sign out on the east bank of the Jordan River, “Reserved for Abraham and Sarah.” That’s not what they found. They found a promised land already full of people.

And it got more complicated. Even though the Lord had promised Abraham and Sarah a child, they went through 24 more years of marriage childless. But Abraham and Sarah stayed on, in faith.

In all that time, even after Isaac was born, Abraham and Sarah never owned any land. They lived in tents, moving from place to place. The only land Abraham could ever officially call his own came through the greatest sadness of his life. After 62 years in the promised land, Abraham’s companion in all his wanderings died, and he finally had to buy some land—to bury his wife.

Even after their son Isaac grew, he still lived in tents. And his son, Jacob, after him did the same. They were foreigners in the promised land. They continued to live ***“by faith.”***

Time and again, God’s promises, while never proved false, often fell short of what at least I would have expected. Yet they kept on living in faith, because, you see, ***“Abraham was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God… They admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.”*** (10,13) Not day after day, or even year after year, but generation after generation. Their family motto was “God said it, therefore we believe it and do it.” Like the first verse of our reading says, ***“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”***

And so it is for us. We have not seen Jesus, yet we believe in him because the Holy Spirit has told us of him in God’s word and convicted us of it in our hearts. We haven’t seen the cross, the suffering, the ugliness of limp and then rigid death settling into a Jesus’ body pale from loss of blood. In the same way, we simply believe God’s sacred record which informs us that after three days the tomb was empty and Jesus risen. We haven’t seen the records of our daily and many sins, and the ledger where the sum total of the debt of our wrongs is crossed off with the note, “Paid by Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.” But we stake our lives and our eternities on it. We have not taken a tour of heaven, yet we wait for it—not because some kid wrote a best-selling book about a vision he supposedly had, but because Jesus himself told us about and promised us a place that is like a royal wedding banquet, a place where we will not be troubled by the things of this world.

And living by faith has more to do with us than merely the spiritual and religious and eternal. Faith impacts everyday life. We commit things, everything, to God in prayer. People wonder that we should be so honest in conversations, on job applications and tax returns that our honesty actually works to our disadvantage! We live life often at odds with the world around us, not because that’s how we were raised, but because of what God has told us. We willingly endure the strange looks from people when we say that man and woman have to wait until marriage, or that the life of an unborn child is a life to be preserved and saved. People think us weird for not laughing at filthy jokes and using salty language.

That’s living by faith. And now, you are starting to live, not with the world, but with Abraham and Noah and Abel and Moses and Rahab and the best of Israel’s kings and the most sincere of their prophets who all lived by faith. They lived so because they actually believed what God said.

We often find ourselves at the place these Hebrews found themselves, where Abraham found himself, in a pinch between the world we live in and the heaven that we wait for. When you feel the pinch, remember those who lived by faith.

***“People who say [and do] such things show that they are looking for a country of their own… They [are] longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them”*** (14,16). Amen.