

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

This verse I'll be using as a sermon refrain comes from our second reading today: Hebrews 11 goes on to tell us that it is **by faith** that we come to understand that this world is created by the word of God, so that things we see come from what is unseen. What we see came from what we do not see. When we look around at the world's beauty, we can trace its origins back to what we do not see, an even more beautiful Word: God's Word, existent from before time and forever. But we only know it by faith.

I don't think that's easy. Living a life based on faith in the unseen — that is never easy. A colleague of mine once preached a sermon in which he let the people know that he never had any doubts about faith in his entire life (he was in his mid-30's). I've never forgotten it — nor the reaction of some parishioners who became upset. I heard comments like: "Well, I have plenty of doubts! I look around at this world's suffering and I think, that makes no sense if God is all-loving. Maybe there is no God; maybe life is just the chance arrangement of elements in some primordial soup. And now it's worse — my preacher is telling me he never has any doubts at all. Maybe I don't belong here in church — maybe I'm really a hypocrite and should just leave."

Well — I 'm not taking that approach. In fact, I respect the power of doubting. Faith is good, but it's doubt that gets you an education! Don't parents tease children by presenting fanciful explanations, just so their kids can say "you're being silly." Faith and doubt are like partners in authentic search for the truth — each needs the other. If you believe everything you hear, you're naive. (Don't believe everything you think.) If you doubt everything you hear, you're a cynic, not trusting wisdom tradition. The opposite of faith is not doubt — the opposite of faith is certitude!

Several weeks ago we held a memorial service here, and one of the guests told me that when she was a teenager, living in rural Clayton, she'd ride her horse to church! She'd sit toward the back and keep an eye on it tied to a fence outside the window. She didn't have to believe in her horse — she could just look at it outside the window. You don't need to believe in the vehicle that brought you to church this morning — it's a certainty that it brought you here. You have a reasonable faith that vehicle will take you back after church. Certitude is about the past, and faith for the future.

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The author of our second reading goes on to give examples of people living in faith, living in the present as if God's promises for the future would come true. Among these is Noah, an almost comic figure enduring the ridicule of his neighbors for trusting God's word in the present about something in the future.

But it's Abraham who serves as the chief model of faith — that God would make him the father of many nations — despite many severe obstacles and setbacks. From our point of view, we can look back and see how Abraham's faith was fulfilled: his descendants are countless as the stars and the grains of sand on the shore. By this

we mean spiritual descendants — that includes all those who worship one God. Monotheism was the basic message of God to Abraham. The three “Abrahamic” children (Jews, Christians and Muslims) have that in common — and how astounding that all three go back a certain person in a certain place — Abraham.

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Does our Gospel passage today help us find the kind of faith we need to follow God? What kind of an example does Jesus give us? Well, at first, it seems our faith is supposed to resemble the faith of servants in a lord and master who is away; he’s at a huge wedding party, and we’re supposed to wait up for him so that when he finally gets home, we can open the door to him, ready and alert. If we’re faithful, he’ll reverse roles and wait on us — no matter how late it is.

But then we have one of those twists we’ve learned to expect from Jesus’s teaching. God’s arrival is now compared to a thief in the night. The householder doesn’t know just when the thief might strike. If we follow this image out, then a break-in is inevitable. No householder can stay up all night. God’s going to break through the barriers.

I’m going to take this parable in a rather different direction today. Why don’t we admit that all of us have some protection around our vulnerable selves? We realize this when our phone rings and it’s someone on the other end who wants to sell us something. It’s quite an effort to be civil — but why? Well, we all have barriers about our money. Even for something we choose to support, like the church we love, we have barriers; if there were no barriers about money, we wouldn’t need an annual pledge campaign.

So what does this do to our faith, if God sometimes act like a thief in the night? Just this: God only steals things from us we really don’t need — God leaves us the essentials. God asks us to have faith despite all the temporary setbacks in our careful plans.

I’d like to end this sermon with two stories about thieves in the night. The first comes from a period in the early church when monks lived in rustic caves. One night a monk came back from a Tenebrae service to find a thief rushing out with his arms filled with food. As the robber stumbled in the darkness, the monk noticed the thief had dropped some loaves of bread. So the monk picked them up and rushed out after the thief, crying, “My brother, make room for these as well!”

The second comes from the Japanese tradition of Zen Buddhism. There’s a full moon, and a Zen monk leaves his hut to walk outside for a while and enjoy the night. When he gets back to his hut he finds everything in it has been stolen. So he sits down, thinks about the thief, and says, “I wish I could give him this beautiful moon.”

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