

How Faith Acts

Part 1 of Sermon Series:

Pillars of Faith

a sermon based on

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

and delivered on

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at

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Today I'm starting a new sermon series: *Pillars of Faith*. Usually when we think about pillars of faith, we think about those persons who exemplify faith. That's not series is about, although some of those pillars come up in the Scripture for today and will come up in the sermon. The pillars of faith that we will be looking at over the next four weeks, though, are the characteristics of faith that not only hold us up but lift us above the fray.

What does it mean to have faith, to trust in things not seen? That's where we're going.

Let's go back to that "definition" of faith in Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (NRSV) It's important that we pay attention to the particular words used, because it's too easy to project other meanings that actually undermine what Scripture is telling us.

First, faith is the assurance of things hoped for... The word is hope it is not wished. Faith is not wishful thinking. It's not wishing for the best. *Hope* has a deeper expectation. *Hope* has this sense of expectation. The New American Standard Bible translation of this passage has a footnote, that offers an alternative rendition so that faith would be the assurance of things expected. Do we think of our hopes like that? As things to be expected? I'd venture to say, probably not. Am I right?

Here's a way of looking at the difference between hopeful thinking and wishful thinking. I wish I had million dollars. I hope to be financially secure. I wish that I wasn't overweight. I hope that losing weight will improve my health. Can you think of something like that for yourself? I wish... I hope...

Wishing expects things to just happen for me. Hope implies that I have a role. In the case of financial security, it means that I don't squander what I have and spend within my means. In the case of improving my health, it means attending to my diet and exercising. Does that make sense?

Nutritionists and kinesiologists have done lots of research confirming that diet and exercise will affect my weight, and that if I follow their instructions that I will eventually experience a slimmer, fitter me; even though that remains unseen. Did you see what I did there? "The conviction of things not seen."

Scientists back up their predictions with prior research. They test a hypothesis. They review the results. They see if those results are repeatable. That's the scientific method. Then they use what's worked before to build upon it. Think about all the physics and chemistry that preceded the Apollo 11 mission to the moon. Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins were willing to sit atop a bomb confident that it would take them to the moon because of so many little experiments from years and even centuries before. They hoped to reach the moon because previous missions had circled it. It wasn't wishful thinking.

Likewise, that's where faith comes in. We can hope and have confidence in what God promised because we see that he is faithful to his promises, even when they seem far out.

Abram and Sarai received a promise that they would be parents. They acted on it. We don't have a virgin birth until Mary. Right? God promised Abraham that he would receive a homeland for his descendants. And he left his home to claim it, even though he didn't know where it was. But he knew that God keeps his promises.

Noah acted in faith when he built the ark. Talk about things unseen or unexpected, but if God made the promise... Well then...

Someone may want to throw some shade, and point out that the Hebrews ended up slaves in Egypt. But let's look at it. When we go back to Joseph's dreams about the famine, it was only expected to be for seven years. It was only when the Israelites got comfortable in Egypt that they decided to stay until "a new king arouse over Egypt who did not know Joseph," (Ex 1:8) and he decided to enslave them. (Ex 1:11) But God remained faithful. Through Moses he led the people from slavery to the promised land. When they couldn't see it and refused to enter

because the people of Canaan were strong, God didn't give up. He waited until the faithless generation had passed away, and then led them right back to the promise. And as long as they trusted God, they got to enjoy it.

Ultimately, God sent Jesus as a witness and testimony to his character. As awful as it is that Jesus died on the cross, do we remember that God spared Isaac after testing whether Abraham was willing to sacrifice him (the embodiment of God's promise to make him the ancestor of multitudes)? In his willingness to suffer on our behalf, God was proving his trustworthiness.

That's where faith comes in. Because God is trustworthy, because we have this great testimony of God acting on his promises, we can hope – we can expect that God will honor his promises to us, even when they seem unattainable. Even when it doesn't happen on our timeline.

Sometimes God will surprise us. Fred Craddock tells the story about a recent seminary graduate serving in his first parish as pastor. He'd received a call that an elderly woman from the church was in the hospital. This was a woman who had given her life to the church and to others and was well respected. And it was to be one of *those* visits. The woman couldn't get out of bed and the doctor's weren't offering much if any encouragement that she would recover.

But he went. He visited. They engaged in small talk, but he knew that he needed to go deeper (that can be intimidating even for pastors). Finally, he asked if he could pray with her before he left.

“Yes, of course. That's why I wanted you to come.”

“And what exactly would you like for me to pray?”

With an astonished tone, “Why, I want you to pray that God will heal me.”

Having heard what the doctors had said, the young pastor wasn't really sure that healing was possible; but, as requested, he prayed for God's healing. It wasn't a very articulate prayer. He stumbled over his words, but after a few minutes he finished by saying, “Amen.”

So this old woman says, “You know I think it worked! I'm healed.” Then she got out of bed and began running up and down the hall of the hospital shouting, “Praise God! I'm healed!”

In the meantime, the pastor stumbled over to the stairwell and walked down the five flights of stairs, out the door into the parking lot, and as he struggled to get the car keys out of his pocket, looked up towards heaven and said, “Don't you ever do that to me again!”¹

I have prayed for healing and not seen it happen. But about five years ago, I ran into a former parishioner at a funeral. She asked me if I remembered that she'd had Bell's Palsy years before (just as I was preparing to move to another church). I did, vaguely. Then she asked if I'd remembered asking if it was okay to lay hands on her and pray. I admitted that I didn't, but that it sounded like something I might do. Then she told me, that she'd gone to the doctor the next day, and the palsy was gone. The doctor was dumfounded and admitted that he couldn't figure out why it resolved so quickly. Then she had her chance, “Well, my pastor laid hands on me and prayed.”

I don't always get the sense that I'm supposed to do that. Sometimes I do, but I'm too embarrassed to act on it. But how else can we claim God's promises unless we act on them.

Acting on faith isn't about wishful thinking. Acting on faith is the means by which we claim God's promises trusting that God is faithful. Sometimes it doesn't look like we expect. The Israelites didn't expect the Canaanites to be so intimidating, so they missed out on the promise for a time. Abram and Sarai didn't expect that Sarah would actually bear a child so they enlisted

¹ Gregory L. Tolle, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit Series. Series V. Cycle C* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Pub. Co, 2006) 132-133.

Hagar into the cause, until God explained that that wasn't what he meant. Then they acted and got Isaac. Joseph didn't fully understand what his purpose in Egypt was, until his brothers appeared asking for food.

Faith is the confidence of things yet unseen. We don't always know exactly what God's promises will look like, but when we live out of a conviction that God will care for all that we need even in the midst of doubt, our faith allows us to claim the promise while we wait. AMEN.