

THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on August 7, 2022

Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith 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.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 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. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 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.” All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Have you ever noticed that so many of the words Christians use are small words? Small words packed with big meanings. Words like sin, grace, peace, and the word for today: faith, which the author of Hebrews defines as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Words like that can have a churchy sound to them—so much so that they’re often dismissed today as old-fashioned and irrelevant. But the fact is, these words, including faith, point to vital realities that never lose their importance. They have a timeless spiritual dimension. They speak of eternal things, holy things. They point to a realm of mystery that lies beyond language itself. They name what cannot be named and describe what cannot be described.

There are lots of things in life that are indescribable: the power of music and art, what it's like to fall in love, how it feels to lose someone close to you. As Frederick Buechner writes in his book, *Beyond Words*, "How can we begin to describe such things other than to say that they are ultimately indescribable? You can know them only by experiencing them for yourself."

And yet, even things that are beyond language are not totally out of reach. We can still talk about them. The words we use might come up short. They might not capture the essence of whatever it is we're trying to understand. But they can at least get us in the ballpark. They can at least circle around the mystery and give us a look at it from different angles. So let's give it a try with faith.

When we talk about having faith, what we usually mean is accepting certain intellectual propositions. Do we believe there is a God? Do we believe God created the universe? Do we believe Jesus was divine? If we can answer "yes" to those kinds of theological questions then we have faith. Simple as that—at least as far as we're concerned. As far as the author of Hebrews is concerned, there's a little more to it than that. For him, faith isn't about checking boxes. It's about how we actually live our lives in the world.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. The author of Hebrews throws out that one-liner and then gives us a list of faithful actions taken by our spiritual ancestors—people like Abraham and Sarah—because he knows their lives, and their stories, tells us a lot about the nature of faith. They reveal that faith is trusting that God rewards those who seek God. They reveal that faith looks beyond present circumstances to the future God has promised. They reveal that faith is tenacious and enduring, able to accept promises deferred because it knows even death doesn't void those promises.

For me, that's the heart of it, the take-away. God is always calling us into new life, new possibilities, and being faithful means leaning into the future God is opening up and trusting that God will keep God's promises to God's people, even if we have to spend some time in the wilderness, even if it takes generations to finally make it to the promised land.

In other words, faith and hope are one, and the life of faith is a pilgrimage, a journey. It's about always scanning the horizon and keeping an eye out for where God is calling us next. Which why, in the example of Abraham and Sarah, the author of Hebrews focuses, not on God's call, but on Abraham's response.

Abraham's response is expressed in obedience; he sets off for the place God has promised, with no idea where that place might be or how long it might take to get there. And when he finally does arrive, he finds out the place isn't actually his to possess—at least not right away. He and his children and his children's children

continue to sojourn as strangers in the land God said would be theirs. Abraham anticipated a city with sure foundations but spent his life living in a tent. He dreamed of a city with a river flowing through it but spent his life wandering in a desert. All because God gave him a vision of a new life in a new land flowing with milk and honey and told him one day it would be his.

So the faith of Abraham and Sarah was much more than right thinking; it was right doing. It involved not just their minds, but their whole being. It was something like the state of alertness Jesus describes in the gospel reading—being dressed and having your lamps lit; listening for that knock on the door in the middle of the night and being ready to go when God appears.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. If you're thinking by now, This is a lot to take in on a warm August morning, and it's kind of making my head hurt, let me give you another way to think about it—another way to think about faith.

Have you ever made waffles? My wife has the best recipe for waffles. She makes the batter the night before and lets it rise overnight. So in the morning what you have is a big mixing bowl full of sticky, yeasty, bubbling goop. It's not very appetizing. In fact, it's kind of gross, and you definitely wouldn't want to eat it like that. But that's the magic of waffles. You ladle that goopy stuff onto a hot waffle iron, clamp it down, and—*voilà!*—it puffs up into golden, delicious waffles. Slather them with butter, pour some maple syrup on top, maybe a sprinkle of powdered sugar, and you've got yourself a feast.

So the next time you're struggling with the idea of faith and worrying that maybe you don't have enough, or what you do have isn't strong enough, just think about making waffles and trust that what comes out of the waffle iron looks and tastes a whole lot better than what goes in. You don't have to have all the right answers. You don't have to have it all figured out. You just have to be listening, and your heart just has to be open. As Frederick Buechner reminds us: "Remember that faith is more of a process than a possession, on-again-off-again than once and for all. Faith is not being sure where you're going, but going anyway. A journey without maps." Amen.