

July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Scripture:

Hebrews 11:1-12:3

“By faith...”

“By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did.”

“By faith Enoch was taken from this life...”

“By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark...”

“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance...”

“By faith even Sarah who was passed childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.”

“By faith, Jacob, even when he was dying blessed each of Joseph’s sons...”

“By faith, Moses’ parents hid him for three months...”

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.”

By faith ---- by faith ---- by faith -----

And on and on it goes in Hebrews 11 today ---- this phrase --- “by faith” appears 21 times in this passage --- it’s like a constant refrain --- by faith --- by faith --- by faith...

And the passage --- begins with a brief and powerful definition of faith.

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

“Confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

So --- all of these 21 “by faith” statements can also be read this way ----

With confidence in what he hoped for and in assurance of what he did not see Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

And ----- With confidence in what he hoped for and in assurance of what he did not see Moses chose to be mistreated along with the other people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

And --- With confidence in what he hoped for and in assurance of what he did not see Jacob, even when he was dying blessed each of Joseph's sons..."

"With confidence in and assurance of even though they could not see" --- that's faith according to Hebrews today --- confidence and assurance without seeing any evidence of that which you are confident of and assured of.

With that in mind let's listen to Eugene Peterson share some of his thoughts on the book of Hebrews.

Eugene Peterson pastor -- poet --- theologian --- and translator on the Bible known as The Message --- on the book of Hebrews.

"The main and central action is everywhere and always what God has done, is doing, and will do for us.

Jesus is the revelation of that action.

In fact, the writer of Hebrews says in chapter 3 verse 3 --- that Jesus is the centerpiece of everything we believe.

Our main and central task is to live in responsive obedience to God's action revealed in Jesus.

Our part in the action is the act of faith.

But more often than not we become impatiently self-important along the way and decide to improve matters with our two cents worth.

We add on, we supplement, we embellish.

But instead of improving on the purity and simplicity of Jesus we dilute the purity, clutter the simplicity.

We get in the way.

That's when its time to read and pray our way through the letter to the Hebrews.

In the letter, it is Jesus-and-angels, or Jesus-and-Moses, or Jesus-and-priesthood.

In our time it is more likely to be Jesus-and-politics, or Jesus-and-education. This letter deletes the hyphens --- the add ons.

The writer urges us --- “Don’t be lured away from him by the latest speculations about him.

The grace of Christ is the only good ground for life.

Products named after Christ don’t seem to do much for those who buy them.”

Rather --- “Keep your eyes on Jesus.”

When we do this the focus becomes clear and sharp once again ---- God’s action in Jesus.

And we are free once more to the act of faith --- the one human action in which we don’t get in the way ----- but on the way.”

Basically Peterson is saying Jesus is the centerpiece ---- it’s not Jesus and this or Jesus and that it’s Jesus and only Jesus.

Don’t let anything get in the way of you and Jesus ---- get everything out of the way so you can get on the way --- the way of the cross --- the way of faith --- the way of Christ.”

Get everything out of the way --- so that you can get on the way.

And that is precisely what Hebrews is all about especially Hebrews 11 --- people who got out of the way of them selves their selfishness ---- and got on the way --- the way of Christ --- letting God use and work through them.

As Peterson says ---

“The main and central action is everywhere and always what God has done, is doing, and will do for us.

Jesus is the revelation of that action.

Jesus is “the centerpiece of everything we believe”.

Our task --- our calling is to live in responsive obedience to God’s action revealed in Jesus.

And as we hear in the book of Hebrews today -- chapter 12 verses 1 and 2 ---

“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

Faith is all about running with perseverance the journey God lays before us - -- and fixing our eyes on Christ as we do it.

Faith isn't about seeing first and then believing second --- give me visible proof first God then I'll believe --- that's not faith ---- that cheques and balances --- that's foolishness that's selfishness --- show me God then maybe I'll believe in you.

Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we **DO NOT** see.

That second part is huge --- the ---- assurance about what we do not see part.

Noah didn't see the mighty water and crashing floods and then believe or have faith --- Noah didn't see that waters and then God paused everything freeze frame will Noah built the ark ---- Noah saw nothing heard nothing except for God --- the most important thing of all.

Moses didn't first see the waters part and then decide to believe and have faith and lead God's people.

For faithless people it's seeing then believing.

For Christians --- for people of faith --- for those who adhere to --- “And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” --- for those who follow Jesus it's the total other way around --- it's believing and then seeing.

Believing and then seeing.

It's ---

“By faith Abel brought God ...”

“By faith Enoch...”

“By faith, Noah ...”

“By faith Abraham...”

“By faith Sarah...”

“By faith, Jacob...”

“By faith, Moses...”

It's not by sight Abel --- and it's not by sight Abraham -- and it's not by sight Noah --- and it's not by sight Moses ---- it's by faith --- by faith --- by faith.

To the naked eye --- in this world --- to the naked eye --- there is only trouble everywhere ----- to those with eyes of faith there is trouble yes ----- but there is also grace ---- grace everywhere.

There is reality and then there is what can be seen.

There is reality and then there is what can be seen ----- and they are not the same thing.

Very often what we see is not reality at all.

Underneath --- deeper below what we see is the hand of God ---- and that is the true reality that we live and move and have our being in.

John Calvin --- 16<sup>th</sup> century theologian ---founder of Reformed theology really ---- said --- “If God should withdraw his hand a little --- all things would immediately perish and dissolve into nothing.”

“If God should withdraw his hand a little --- all things would immediately perish and dissolve into nothing.”

What this means is until all things perish --- until the end of time as we know it --- it is God's hand deep below --- far underneath what we see ----- that is holding things together --- that is guiding and sustaining all things.

As we just sang --- in the bulb there is a flower ---- unrevealed until its season something God alone can see.

Underneath --- deeper down that we can ever go on our own --- is God's wonderful marvelous overwhelming goodness and grace at work ---- moving ----- positioning ---- orchestrating all things according to His perfect and timeless will.

There is what we see and then there is reality --- and the two are not the same.

What people saw in Noah was a mad man wasting all his time building some useless gigantic boat for what --- for nothing they thought.

The reality was he was doing God's will.

The reality was God was preparing Noah for a beautiful and saving act.

What some people saw in Moses was a crazy man saying things he couldn't possibly ever fulfill or carry out --- the leader of a bunch of people going nowhere --- slaves --- conquered subservient --- weak.

The reality was Moses was a man after God like no one before or after Him except Jesus Christ Himself.

What people saw in David as he approached the mighty Goliath --- was just a young boy ---- wet behind the ears --- green --- inexperienced ---- the situation looks hopeless ----- wee boy --- a sling and a few stones --- a might giant trained in battle --- armour sword and so on.

The reality was there in God's name --- down went the giant ---- in one fowl blow.

What people saw on the cross was a man killed --- a misguided trouble maker killed ----- a false prophet --- some carpenter's son ---- this Jesus from Nazareth

The reality was the Son of God was being lifted up and glorified on the cross.

The reality was sin was being conquered on the cross.

The reality was salvation was coming on ---- in and through the cross.

There is what we see and then there is reality and the two are not the same.

As the preacher says in Hebrews today --- “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

Confidence in what we hope for --- and assurance in what we **DO NOT** see.

Our world is mostly all about what we can see --- not faith.

Faith is all about a reality not immediately available to human eyes.

Jesus wasn't just being killed as people thought they were seeing --- He was fulfilling --- He was conquering --- He was reconciling ---- He was saving --  
- it wasn't a shameful dirty humiliating act ----- rather it was an act of profound glory and beauty --- it was an act of God but few saw this.

In the church today in places in the world where the church has been weakened --- like Canada --- North America --- Europe --- maybe just maybe there is something far deeper and more powerful and beautiful and God directed going on --- I believe there is.

I believe there is more going on here at St. Andrew's than we can see with our eyes.

Week after week more and more people are sharing with me moments of divine activity in their lives --- you know who you are --- you know what you have experienced --- not seen necessarily --- but experienced --- the hand of God at work.

With this there has also been some great negativity and resistance from others as well --- satan does not like divine action without also darkness ---- attrition is real ----- the prince of darkness is real.

But so is grace --- and grace wins every time.

We have nothing to fear --- we just need to be patient.

We don't live by what we see --- we live by what God is doing --- and for long long periods of time --- especially before great breakthrough ---- things look rough ---- things are rough.

Look just past our reading today in Hebrews 12 for evidence of this.

It's all about hardship and discipline and how these things produce a harvest of righteousness if we are willing to be trained by God --- if we are willing to run the race God sets before us --- not the race we want --- not the race we think of --- but the race God sets before us.

Abel --- Enoch ----- Noah ---- Abraham ----- Sarah ---- Jacob ---- Moses.

All the people ---- that great cloud of witnesses mentioned in Hebrews 11 today --- were all trained in hardships and in discipline.

The great cloud of witnesses all ran the race that was marked before them fixing their eyes on Jesus.

Not fixing their eyes on what they could see.

Not fixing their eyes on what they could see because as we know --- "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

Abel --- Enoch ----- Noah --- Abraham ----- Sarah ---- Jacob ---- Moses ----- all walked in faith --- all had confidence and assurance in what they could NOT see --- all threw off everything that hinders and entangles them --- all ran the race as it was marked out for them fixing their eyes on Jesus Christ.

They are inspirations.

These are the people we are to look up to --- these are the people we are to follow.

Who are you heroes and heroines in faith --- Biblical and extra Biblical?

Think about the faithful people in your life ---- who because of the faith God blessed them with ----- changed you --- helped you --- encouraged you on your faith journey.

Take a moment to remember someone --- or someones --- it doesn't have to be just one person it can be more than one --- take a moment to remember someone you know who walked in faith --- who didn't decide on things based on how things appeared but who worked from the place that God was at work underneath all the nonsense and foolishness that surrounded them at the time.

God gave that person those gifts at that time ----- and somehow you too were blessed by them --- the person --- God through the person influenced ----- encouraged ----- grew you.

God provided.

God provides.

And God will provide again --- and again and again.

Abel --- Enoch ----- Noah ---- Abraham ----- Sarah ---- Jacob ---- Moses --- Rahab --- Gideon ---- Barak ---- Samson --- Jephthah --- David --- and so on.

All the people ---- that great cloud of witnesses mentioned in Hebrews 11 are gifts from God.

The person or persons you just thought about is a gift from God --- to you --- - to others ----- to this world.

As John Calvin said --- back in the 16<sup>th</sup> ----- “If God should withdraw his hand a little --- all things would immediately perish and dissolve into nothing.”

It is God's hand that keeps things going --- ordered --- in line ---- beautiful and majestic and overwhelming as it is.

Until everything here dissolves into nothing --- until Christ comes again ---- until the end of time as we know it --- it is only ever and always God's hand that controls and guides and drives and sustains all things.

Therefore ----- as Hebrews 12 opens up ----

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Hebrews 11 gives us this incredible list of faithful people that God took in His hands and used for His beautiful and reconciling and redeeming and saving purposes.

Abel --- Enoch ----- Noah ---- Abraham ----- Sarah ---- Jacob ---- Moses --- Rahab --- and so on ----- Gideon --- Barak --- Samson --- David --- and so on many more not even mentioned.

God reminds us today --- of all these beautiful faith filled people who didn't walk by sight --- and instead chose to walk by faith.

They didn't walk a road of their choosing --- they ran the race as verse 1 from chapter 12 says --- that was marked out ----- that was marked out for them.

God has a race ---- a road --- a way --- a journey --- that is marked out for us --- we don't have to find it --- we don't have to discover it --- we simply have to follow it --- it's already marked out for us.

Unfortunately as we see in Hebrews 12 just past our reading most of us don't like to follow and be disciplined by God --- we like to decide for ourselves where we think we should go and what we think we should do.

Despite this great list of faithful followers who followed no matter what the cost ----- we think we know better sometimes --- too often --- and we ant to go our own way and do things the way we ant to do them.

Do you think Noah wanted to stop what he was doing and built this giant boat?

How about Moses ----- he for sure didn't think he had what it was going to take --- and Isaiah and Jonah -- and Jeremiah after him all wanted to do

things differently than God did --- they were hesitant --- uncertain --- under qualified ---- but they were also chosen by God.

God led the way --- God marked out their races --- their lives for them.

Every single person on the list in Hebrews 11 followed where God directed them --- they didn't go their own way ---- they didn't follow what they saw - -- they did as God so led them --- they walked in faith.

Oh that people would describe our lives in a similar way --- By faith ----- insert your name here --- by faith \_\_\_\_\_ walked in faith.

By faith so and so lived.

By faith --- so and so raised their children.

By faith so and so served the church.

By faith --- it is an honour ----- the highest honour to have our life described by someone else later on --- starting with by faith ---- and then sharing our lives ---- who we were.

“By faith Abel...”

“By faith Enoch...”

“By faith, Noah...”

“By faith Abraham...”

“By faith even Sarah...”

“By faith, Moses...”

By faith ---- insert your name here...”

By faith they persevered.

By faith we persevere.

We don't persevere because we see it getting better.

Things never got better for Moses or for Noah --- or for Abraham ---- in many ways they just got harder and harder.

Things never got better for Jesus --- He followed not because things got better or easier.

We follow --- we persevere --- not because things get better --- we follow we persevere --- we run the race as it is marked out for us --- not by us --- but for us by God --- because of faith --- because of the assurance of the goodness of God.

Visually Noah was a nut bar.

Optically Noah was out of his mind.

Visually --- optically ---- Jesus was a miserable failure --- just a few close followers one of whom betrayed him for a little pocket full of cash.

Faith is not at all about appearances --- if you are all about how things appear ---- if you are all about optics --- and posturing and "look at me" --- you cannot be a person of faith.

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

That last part is crucial --- what we do **NOT** see ---- if you just want things to look good --- if you just want to feel good have an emotional high all the time then faith in God is not for you.

Look at the end of Hebrews chapter 11 ---

"And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

And then this ---

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.  
Some faced jeers and flogging,  
and even chains and imprisonment.

They were put to death by stoning;  
they were sawed in two;  
they were killed by the sword.

They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated ---- the world was not worthy of them.  
They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.”

And if those last verses aren't enough --- read verse 4 to 13 in chapter 12 later today --- just past our passage --- rainbows and butterflies all the time isn't real faith.

Endure hardship as discipline verse 7 from chapter 12 reads --- and then verse 11 reads --- “  
“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

Living in ----- and living by faith can be a challenge ---- a challenge well worth it --- but a challenge for sure.

Thankfully we have all of these great examples of faithful people gone by to help us --- to encourage us --- and to sustain us.

And like them --- we too have to throw things off and trust and have faith --- and follow and obey --- and submit --- and be ready for those who will try to knock us off God's course for our lives.

The last few lines from our passage today drive this home ---

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

The one who endured ---- scorning --- shame --- opposition ---- is the one we are to keep our eyes fixed on.

We have a firm foundation in Christ.

That is what is beautiful and true and saving and righteous and so much more.

Not our lives --- not what we do --- not what we don't do --- not how we are treated and so on.

People who just want it the way they want it have no place in the kingdom of God.

People who live by faith ---- well there is something else going on there in their lives all together.

Listen to the last lines of chapter 11 from Hebrews ---

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

All these faithful people that have just been held up is righteous didn't get what they were promised.

Verses 39 and 40 from Hebrews 11 today -----

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

Why --- wait just a minute here ---- why didn't they get what they were promised --- the answer --- because God had something more beautiful in store ----- the answer because Jesus hadn't yet come.

As good as all these examples are --- God had more in store for them that He hadn't yet communicated to them ---- God had Jesus Christ in store.

The perfecter of faith.

God had something better planned for them --- God has something better planned for us ----- Jesus Christ.

As good as Moses and Isaac and Abraham and Sarah were --- as good and faithful as Gideon and Barak were ----- God still hadn't got to Jesus --- God still hadn't entered into creation Himself and walked the earth as we now do..

Chapter 11 is incomplete without also Jesus Christ ---- the pioneer and perfecter.

Life is incomplete without also Jesus --- the pioneer and perfecter of our faith --- the great and saving one.

God always has something better in store --- something we can't even comprehend --- let alone see.

After all thee great people in faith ----- there is still Jesus to come.

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

By faith we live.

By faith we persevere.

By faith we trust.

By faith we do absolutely everything.

Without it we are nothing.

By faith .....

By faith....

By faith...

To God be glory now and forever.

Amen.