

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 12 -- Aug. 12th and 15th, 2010

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is being sure of what we hope -for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. 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. By 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. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age-and Sarah herself was barren was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, 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 fellow believers,

Where do you go when it feels like help from God is nowhere to be found in your troubles? I suggest you go to God's promise in Psalm 23: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. What do you do when everything seems against you and you're staring at the ceiling at night worrying how you're going to make it through the next day? I suggest you remember the words of Psalm 50: Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you. Where do you turn when your desire to sin feels greater than your desire to resist? I suggest that you hold fast to Paul's words in Philippians 4 that remind us that I can do everything through Jesus who gives me strength. What do you do when the sin you confess to God seems too shameful and its consequences too far-reaching for him to forgive? I suggest you turn to Micah chapter 7 where the prophet spells out the truth about God's forgiveness: You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl ALL our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

When God's help for you seems inconceivable or the days ahead of you seem insurmountable or the temptations around you seem irresistible or the sins you've committed seem unforgiveable, a look at God's Word will quickly and undeniably show you that what seems the case is not the case. God's help accompanies you every step. God's protection surrounds you every day. God's strength helps you stand against every temptation. God's forgiveness washes away your every sin.

But wouldn't a little proof be nice? To — just for a moment — see evidence of God walking beside you as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death. To — maybe just one time — see a preview of how God will make all things work out for your good in the days and months and years ahead. To physically feel Christ's power well up in you to resist the temptation that you've fallen for so many times before. To hear the voice of God himself from heaven saying, I have forgiven that sin too. Just a little bit of tangible evidence that all of those wonderful promises of help and protection and strength and forgiveness are more than just letters on a page—but the truth.

Wouldn't a little proof be nice? That's a bad question. It assumes that all of God's wonderful promises are simply letters and words on a page and are not God's guaranteed truth. It assumes that in order to know for sure that God really is doing what he says he is doing I have to see him doing it with

my eyes or feel him doing it with my emotions. The proof, God says, is spelled out in letters and words on the pages of Scripture. Words which tell you that you're not alone even when you feel alone. Words which tell you that you are eternally safe even when your eyes see danger all around. Words which tell you that you're no longer a slave to sin even when you feel wrapped up in its chains. Words which tell you that God doesn't hold your sin against you even when you feel like he's out to get you.

The proof of God's promises is in God's promises. Since God says it, it is true. He does not lie. And that you believe what he says is true just because he says it's true is faith. Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Sermon Theme: Faith Is Trust. Trust in God's Promises

- 1. That what we don't see now is real**
- 2. And what we don't have now is coming**

Hebrews chapter eleven is a tour through the Old Testament. Reading it it's like God taking you by the hand and pointing to believers of days gone by who trusted what God said just because God said it. God points you to Abraham: He was a wealthy old man sitting on some prime real estate in present-day Iraq when God called him to pack up and go to the promised land — even though Abraham didn't even know where that would be. By faith in God's promise, not by the evaluation of a map and real estate outlooks, Abraham obeyed and went. With trust that what God said was true he lived the rest of his life in tents in a foreign country, confident that God would give it to him because he said he would give it to him.

The tour through the Old Testament continues. God points to Abraham again: He was seventy-five and Sarah sixty-five and childless when God promised a son from her womb and descendants like the sand on the seashore. Not after the evaluation of their good-as-dead bodies, but by faith in God's promise and after twenty-five more years of waiting were Abraham and Sarah enabled to bring Isaac in to the world. And they saw with their eyes that God was able to do with their worn-out bodies what he said he would do.

God takes you on this tour of the faithful not in order to show you, Look how good a job they did at trusting God! See, you can do better! Rather, God shows us their faith so that we may see all the more clearly his faithfulness. So that you may see that just as God didn't fall short of keeping his promises to them, he won't fall short of keeping his promises to you. God knows how weak we are. He knows our sins of trying to measure his kindness by how well we live and his love by how happy we are and his power by the amount of opposition we face and his forgiveness by the amount of guilt we feel. And as much reason as those sins of distrust give God angrily to allow us to fall into total unbelief, God instead comes to us in our weakness and says, Look how strong I am. I who formed the universe by my command and gave the promised land to Abraham's offspring and brought the forefather of your Savior from a ninety-year-old barren womb will also do what I said I would do for you. Look and see what I've done for your spiritual ancestors and trust me.

That's faith. Trust in God's promises. If God has promised it, then it is real, even if we don't see it now. Even if I don't see his help, he who formed the universe is my helper. Even if I can't observe his protection, he who guarded Abraham's tent also guards and keeps me. Even if I don't feel his power, he who has brought healthy babies from barren wombs will give me the strength I need. Even if I don't feel forgiven, he who sacrificed his Son in my place testifies in his word that it is true, and he has hurled all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

Can we see God doing those and all the other things that he promises he is doing? No. But he is. And he has given us faith to believe it. Faith is trust in God's promises. Trust that even though we don't see it now, what God has promised is real.

2. That what we don't have now is coming

And, faith is trust that what we don't have now is coming. Trust that those things God has promised you that you don't have yet will one day be yours. Listen to what God says about your spiritual forefathers: All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.

When Abraham died, he didn't hold the title to the promised land. He was still living in a tent. All he owned in Canaan was the plot in which he was buried. But he trusted God's promise that it would be given to him through his offspring—and, five hundred years later, it was. When Abraham died, his descendants through Isaac weren't as uncountable as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. He could count them on one hand. But he trusted God's that it would happen, and it did. When Abraham died, the birth of his descendant and his Savior Jesus still lay two thousand years in the future. He didn't hold the Christ-child in his hands, but could only welcome him from a distance. And he trusted God's promise that the Savior from his family would die for his sins and rise for his eternal life, and he did. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.

God takes us on this tour of his faithfulness to strengthen us, so that we also may be living by faith when we die. That we may die with the trust that even what we don't have now is coming. With the trust that as surely as we have God's help in trouble now, in heaven there will be no trouble. That as surely as we have God's protection from dangers now, in heaven there will be no dangers. That as surely as God gives us strength to resist temptation now, in heaven there will be no temptations. That as surely as God has forgiven every last one of our sins and none of them stand between us now, in heaven we will have no sins to forgive.

Those blessings of everything perfect all the time are coming, even though we don't hold them in our hands, feel them with our emotions, and always experience them in our actions now. They are real, even though we don't see them now. Right now we see them on the pages of the Bible and through our God-given faith and welcome them from a distance. In heaven, when we join Adam and Eve and Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and the rest of God's church that has gone on before us, we will stand by our Savior and see with our eyes what we now see by faith in the distance.

Faith is trust. Faith is trust in what is true. What God has promised you is true. He does not lie. Through his Word and sacraments, may he increase our trust that what we don't see now is real and that what we don't have now is coming. Amen.