



BIBLE STUDY for the NINTH SUNDAY after PENTECOST



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

Additional texts: Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20; Psalm 50: 1-8, 22-23; Luke 12: 32 – 40

Because of the human tendency to see the events and challenges of our time as being particularly difficult or momentous, it is easy to overlook what generations before us had to face and overcome. Occasions like church anniversaries provide us opportunities to look back and learn from those witnesses to the Gospel who preceded us. Truth be told, every community experiences a season of discouragement or listlessness at one time or another. In such a season, calling upon the memories of those who have gone before us can be a powerful source of encouragement and inspiration. Today's passage in the letter to the Hebrews is a summons to faith and a word of encouragement to a community who appears to have grown weary of the Christian life.

Seemingly caught up in the challenges of their day, it may have been difficult to see a way forward. Some were struggling with their faith and others were neglecting to meet together. At the time of the letter's composition, things seemed even more fraught than when the community had faced explicit external pressure and duress, including the confiscation of property. In the time since, they had become less confident and their energy for the faith seems to have waned. The letter is written with the intention of offering encouragement and in the hope of reawakening the community's faith.

In chapter 6, the writer articulated at length the certainty of God's promises and covenants, recalling the divine fidelity shown to Abraham. Here in chapter 11, the text shifts away from emphasizing what God has promised to focus on the human experience of faith in that promise. It moves from emphasizing the power of God to underscoring the vital and empowering nature of human faith. Here the text is filled with pathos, with the well-known opening verse signalling, concisely and effectively, both the potential and problem of religious faith: "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*" (11:1). Here faith is synonymous with assurance and conviction, but it pertains to that which is hoped for and, as such, remains yet unseen. The verse is among the most beloved in all of scripture because it connects readers across the ages to our deep longing. While the letter does not wrestle with the problem of human suffering, per se, it implicitly acknowledges the threat of human despair. For the writer, faith is the certitude that what humans most need, want, and hope for, is real and on the way.

Just when the writer has our attention and has us listening closely, the text proceeds to render visible the hope that can all too easily appear beyond our reach. Drawing on collective memory, the writer reminds us that, "*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*" (11:2-3).

Invoking the memory of those who have come before us is no less powerful now than it was for the audience of the letter to the Hebrews. The writer's litany of examples of those in ancient Israel who lived "by faith" brings to visibility and life the hope that his readers carry in their hearts. The author settles on the case of Abraham, to whom Israel traces its beginnings. Verses 8-12 highlight how Abraham acted on his faith in the absence of any real knowledge of where he was going or how things would work out. Thus the writer gathers together for us the "great cloud of witnesses" to which the letter explicitly alludes in the next chapter.

What, in the past, could only be hoped for, becomes visible here through memory. The writer uses traditions about the past to enable the reader to see what can be realized in the future.

Just as the hopes of our forebears were brought to fruition, that which is seemingly impossible will be fulfilled in overwhelming abundance, like the descendants of Sarah and Abraham who “*were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore’*” (11:12). By invoking their memory, the writer also manages to subtly weave together the stories of Sarah and Abraham with those of the letter’s readers. The writer creates for the audience a sense of lineage and belonging.

The passage closes with the reminder that those who came before did not see the complete fulfilment of the promises to which their faith held firm, as they were “*strangers and foreigners on earth*” (11:13), ones “*seeking a homeland*” (11:14). Abraham sought after a new homeland that he did not know, in order to respond, by faith, to the promises of God.

So, too, do the readers of Hebrews belong to another realm and way of being. Letting go of conventional norms and values, or even losing social standing, can make sense to those who live by faith, for they know they belong to “*a better country, that is, the heavenly one*” (11:16). The letter buoys those who feel marginalized or oppressed by their faith, by reminding them that they belong to a larger reality that binds them to the promises of God and to those women and men of faith who have come before.

(From the Working Preacher website)

- Are you experiencing a season of discouragement or listlessness? Do you find it difficult to find a way forward? Are you struggling with your faith?
- Bring to mind someone who has passed on whose life and faith encouraged and inspired you. Based on this memory, let their life and faith encourage and inspire you now.
- And then ask God to increase your faith, so that you become certain that what you most need, want and hope for, is real and on the way.

Let us pray

*God of judgment and grace,
you ask not for sacrifices
but lives of trusting faith
that acknowledge your power and mercy.
Give us faith as deep and strong as Abraham's and Sarah's,
that we may follow you through all our days
as did Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.*

