

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Faith for the Ages

Sermon Reflection Notes

The book of Hebrews is a sermon written to encourage the discouraged Christians of the author's day. It begins with 10 chapters proclaiming that Jesus persevered, enduring suffering and offering himself as the ultimate and final sacrifice to bring others into a new covenant relationship with God. Chapter 11 begins with: *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Assurance*, from the Greek word *hypostasis*, can also be translated as *foundation*...so the Hebrews verse could also be translated as *Faith is the foundation of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*.

These words were originally meant to encourage the people who initially followed Jesus with great zeal, but who also, as time dragged on, began to drift away from the faith. Perseverance is hard. The book of Hebrews is a rallying cry to rekindle the faith, rekindle the hope, and persevere in faith, knowing that God will be faithful. The author (preacher) of Hebrews offers an anthology of Biblical heroes who did things "by faith." By faith Abel did this, by faith Enoch did that, by faith Noah built an ark without a cloud in the sky. Eighteen times the preacher says "by faith" and gave examples of people who pursued unseen realities promised by God, and in time, the invisible became visible. This preacher keeps going, listing names whose stories are renowned: Moses, Joshua, even Rahab, a non-Jewish woman prostitute is listed in the roll of people who acted by faith. And the names keep going: Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, David, Samuel...those who by faith "conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fires." But not everybody escaped the lions; some were tortured, some imprisoned, some died without seeing the promise fulfilled. Faith does not mean we know how the story will end.

The list in Hebrews is long, and could have easily included many, many more: Ruth, Mary, Esther, Deborah. And the list of Jesus' followers who acted by faith was just beginning when Hebrews was written. There are so many more who followed: Nino of Georgia, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther King Jr. We could all add to the list. The continuity from Hebrews through today is that all the 'great cloud of witnesses' acted with faith as their foundation of things hoped for, their conviction of things not seen.

Optimism believes that things will get better if we think positively, if we try hard enough. But hope, hope acknowledges that we may not see the outcome. What we yearn for may seem too distant to comprehend. To hope is to say that things may only get better in God's timing, but that goodness will win the day even if we don't live to see it.

Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses; we can run with perseverance. It encourages us, like those hearing it originally, to keep going, to keep the faith. And above all, to remember Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Pastor Ron mentioned that one thing he really appreciates about the Bible is that, other than Jesus—the incarnate God—nobody is made out to be perfect. The list called out of those who acted 'by

faith' wasn't a list of squeaky clean, perfect people. Hebrews doesn't celebrate their perfection; it celebrates their faith. Faith is the stubborn foundation beneath imperfect people. It is the substance that supports hope when circumstances give us every reason to abandon it.

200 years ago, John Clarke, a Methodist preacher from Illinois, snuck across the Mississippi river once a month and spent three days preaching in what became the city of Manchester. He had a conviction that the Methodist Movement might take hold in the Louisiana Territory, but he didn't live to see it. John Ball donated a building, Manchester UMC's first structure in 1837, but couldn't have imagined the sanctuary we worship in today. There was hope in things not seen. As we celebrate 200 years of worship, ministry, and fellowship, we can't know what our church will look like in 2076 or 2176. But because we have a great cloud of witnesses to encourage us, we have hope that the redemptive power of Jesus, the cross, and the resurrection will still be proclaimed in powerful ways. We have a conviction about a future we can't see. We act in the present with hope for things we may never see.

Jesus is alive and the Holy Spirit will long be at work at Manchester United Methodist Church long after we are dead, leading the church to love God and neighbor. Let us run the race set before us, by faith.

Scripture

Hebrews 11:8-16, 12:1-2

⁸By 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. ⁹By 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. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith, with Sarah's involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore 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."

¹³All 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, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Discussion Questions

1. Pastor Ron described faith this way: *Faith is a substance that supports what we hope for—even when we can't see the future, we have a conviction that undergirds our faith in the present.*
 - a. Why do we link hope and faith together? How do we define them both and what purpose do they serve in our lives?
2. How are *optimism* and *hope* alike? How are they different?
3. What is perseverance? What does perseverance have to do with hope and/or faith?
4. Pastor Ron said about the people listed in Hebrews (and in the Bible): *"Hebrews does not celebrate their perfection. It celebrates their faith. Faith is not the reward given to perfect people. Faith is the stubborn foundation beneath imperfect people. It is the substance that supports hope when circumstances give us every reason to abandon it."* These are powerful words. Why? What do they call us to consider?
5. We can't know what the church will look like or be doing 50 years from now, much less 200 years from now. But what are our dreams for the future of Manchester UMC?

Closing Prayer

As we come before this text, O God, we are mindful that we have not come first—that others have come before us to be your Church. And so we give thanks for the people of the text—prophets, apostles, saints, and martyrs—whose stories are familiar to us, and who call to us, as a great a cloud of witnesses, to be courageous and hope-filled people too.

We pray that you will help us to be prophets also—to be truth-tellers who willingly take risks. We pray to be disciples, faithful in love of God and love of neighbor. We pray to be saints who live with passion for the sake of the Gospel. We pray to be people who never waver from the truth of your love, love that never wavers from all creation.

Help us to live by faith, and not by sight; by faith and not by financial security; by faith and not by doctrinal certitude; by faith and not by what is popular in our culture; by faith and not by our morality or purity; by faith—always by faith in your steadfast love and mercy for all of us. We pray in the name of Jesus, who live and died and was raised to new life. Amen.

"We act in the present with hope for things we may never see."