

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

August 12, 2007  
Rev. Robin Long

1Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. 2This is what the ancients were commended for.

3By 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.

8By 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. 9By 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. 10For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11By 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. 12And 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.

13All 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. 14People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16Instead, 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.

I call it the theology of throw pillows. You know those cutesy little embroidered pillows that you find resting in the corners of people's couches, seemingly just effortlessly tossed there and yet they had to have been painstakingly arranged there otherwise they wouldn't be placed right side facing out, right side up for passers-bys to enjoy their witty little messages. The one cross stitch project I have ever attempted was one such pillow top. If and when I ever finish it, it will read, "Lord, help me to remember that nothing is going to happen today that you and I can't handle together." Now if you've gotta read something every time you sit down on your couch, that's not a bad thing to read. And the same is true of these opening words from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the letter Paul wrote to the Hebrews. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." I have seen this written on pillows and indeed these very words are on a framed print that hangs on our bedroom wall. The print was a wedding gift from my mother-in-law—she obviously knew then what I was only to begin discovering about marriage—that this verse is a very good slogan for any marriage—"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." In the beginning, it was easy for me to see the love in our marriage. Corey frequently brought me flowers, we took romantic walks in the rain, we went out for dinner, he read to me, and he almost always cooked dinner. But now, seven years later, it ain't so easy to see the love and I'm doing almost all the cooking. And yet, if you were to ask me of the things I am most certain of in this life—Corey's love for me would be towards the top of the list. And yet, if I were asked to prove it, I'd have a hard time doing so. Our love isn't prove-able or obvious. We aren't one of those couples who you look at and think, "Wow, what a great marriage. They're so in love." It's more like you meet us and think to yourself, "Wow, how did those two ever end up together?" As our friend Jim's dad said on the occasion of his 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, "You marry the person who drives you the most crazy and yet whom you cannot live without." Now I know that for myself this is so true, but it's not the kind of thing you'd find embroidered on a throw pillow.

This reminds me of the life of faith that Paul talks about this morning. I mean think of it—this Christianity thing, isn't it also a little bit like that fellow's description of marriage? For me it is.

Christianity can really drive me crazy sometimes, it can make me feel like I'm living on the edge of sanity—and yet I can't imagine—nor do I want to imagine, my life without it.

A couple of weeks ago I was listening to the NPR program Interfaith Voices that plays Sundays at 3 PM on IPR and I highly recommend it to you. The host was interviewing the author of a book that rips apart organized religions, he seemed especially fond of his critique of Christianity. He points to the fact that many of the wars and upheavals in this world have been instigated by folks claiming to be acting in the name of God. And though I was instantly defensive because I love God and I love church and I love how being raised in a Christian home shaped my life, I couldn't—on a basis of fact—disagree with him. He's right—a whole lot of really awful things—the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the elimination and oppression of millions of native folks in our country and many others, the Balkan Wars, to name a few—have all been done in the name of the Christian God; a God who folks like you and me claim is a loving, merciful, and peaceful God. From an outsider's point of view, I have to agree with the cynical author and so though it is the faith upon which I stake my life, Christianity can really drive me crazy.

And it's not just these historical examples. It's also the sacred scripture upon which our faith is based that can really make me feel like I'm living on the edge of sanity. Let's just take a moment to think about the stories in this thing . . . this is not a manual for the feel good life nor is it for the weak of heart. The stuff that happens in the pages of the Bible could make a Soap Opera Writer blush and puts the most creative murder/mystery writer to shame. Just pages into “the greatest story ever told” we have a guy who kills his brother and a God who forgives him and threatens to kill anyone who would kill him. Not long after there's a huge flood that wipes out all of humanity except one righteous guy and his family and how does said righteous guy celebrate his survival, he gets stark raving drunk at the altar he makes to the Lord. And speaking of altars, there's the one at which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son. Now we know that the story turns out okay and Isaac survives, but what kind of a God tortures a person like that, making him prove his love by raising a knife above the heart of his beloved son. And speaking of beloved sons, there's that dreadful scene from Exodus, you know the one before the Israelites flee, the one where God sends a plague that kills all of the infant sons of the Egyptians? Any parent knows that we wouldn't wish the death of a child on our worst enemy, and here's God just taking the lives of thousands of Egyptian boys just because their leader is being a jerk? Now all of this doesn't even begin to compete with what I call the “ite” stories. You know those Old Testament stories about the Hittites, the Ammorites, the . . . all of those “ites” who kill and are killed and who God sanctions for the Israelites to kill? And then there's Job, a pawn in a power struggle between God and Evil, stripped of everything in life we hold sacred—reputation, livelihood, family, home, health—all so God can prove a point. And though I can really get going on the Old Testament, don't think that all of the stories that can drive a person to edge of sanity in terms of their Christian discipleship are there. Oh contraire. Even Jesus himself—our Lord and Savior, the one who came to save the world, even Jesus can drive me to the edge. Remember that scene with the Syro-Phonician woman? The one in which she asks Jesus to heal her daughter and he says that his healing isn't for the likes of her. Remember that? Can you imagine? Jesus, our brother kind and good, refusing to heal someone because she was born on the wrong side of the tracks. Now thank God that after some sound reasoning on the mother's part he does heal her child, indeed he heals her child because of the woman's faith. But still, shouldn't he have just healed the little girl in the first place—regardless of her nationality, and just left well enough alone? And farther along in the New Testament there's some of that stuff that Paul writes—plenty of sexist, exclusionary, elitist talk that can really get me going but today I won't even get started.

Now see why I said it can drive you crazy? Most folks who stand up in pulpits on Sunday mornings, myself included, don't preach this stuff and yet it's in here, just as surely as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm with its green pastures and still waters, or the prophecy of a lion lying down with a lamb, or the wonderful story that begins that night in Bethlehem when the angels sang to shepherds on a hillside and a baby was born, wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger. I suppose it's these stories that keep us going; these wonderful stories of comfort, new life, and affirmation that keep us keeping on in our Christian discipleship. Stories about people like Abraham who, though he had no proof that there even was a Promised Land, kept following God's directions on how to get there. Folks like Moses who never reached the land flowing with milk and honey and yet dedicated his life to the faith he needed to have in order to get there. We, like them, continue to search, as Paul puts it "for a country of our own." We search for God's country—that place that we are sure exists, that place that though we've never even seen it, we believe in it and want to be there because we are sure and thankful that this life is not as good as it gets. We still search for it—in spite of the blood and gore of the "ites". In spite of what many scholars have considered a mistake on Jesus' part when dealing with the Syro-Phoenician woman. In spite of the nasty things Paul wrote about women. We still abide in faith, because, for some reason, we believe.

And I suppose that's why it's called having faith and not having proof. And in understanding that, we are granted a kind of freedom for living that this world does not give. I don't have to prove to you that Corey and I love each other—it's not provable. You don't have to prove to me that God loves you—it's not provable. We don't have to prove the existence of God to critics like the guy who wrote that book—God's not provable. We are people of faith, we live beyond the limited and limiting realm of fact and proof. And that, my friends, is good news. That, my friends, is freedom. That, my friends, is the new life and life everlasting that is ours in Jesus our Christ. That my friends, is life on the edge—living the life of Christian faith even though it makes us a little crazy at times and yet still we do it because we can't imagine our lives without it.

1Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.