

[Sermon Hebrews 11 faith.doc]

FIRST LUTHERAN, MARSHALL

PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

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Hebrews 11:1-16, 12:1-2; Matthew 8:5-10

*The Meaning of Faith*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*



Says Ps. 46:1 *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

And inspired by that psalm, Martin Luther wrote his iconic hymn, *A mighty fortress is our God...*

**Faith** has long been described as a **solid rock**, a **mighty fortress**, an **impenetrable place of security**...within which we are invited to rest...safe and secure...free from all worries

Says the theologian Bryon Whitfield,

*Faith provides a guarantee, the peg on which we hang our hopes. Because of faith, our hope is no flimsy dreaming; it has substance and reality. Faith provides a ground to which we may hold fast.*

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=656](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=656)

But in spite of those words, plus the fact that I'm showing an image of a thick-walled stronghold boasting big, bold battlements, we know that faith is not a place. In truth, it's often the opposite of a place to which we must go in order to feel secure in our relationship with God.

In fact:

- what gives us a sense of security in our relationship with the Lord,
- what fills us with a sense of trust,
- what helps us stand firm in our faith...more often than not, is not a WHAT...or a WHERE...but a **WHO**...

So, thinking back over your life, pick a person who was-or-is that solid rock of faith for you:

A grandparent, a god-parent, a step-parent...

An advisor, a counselor, a neighbor...

A youth leader, a teacher, a preacher...

Please take a few moments to **think/write** or **talk** with your neighbor about this person of faith who inspired you – and, as I mentioned, I'd like to have a couple of people ready to volunteer to share...

[Music]

Faith is, first of all, about holding fast to the promises of God...and helping others come to that spiritual place of blessedness, right?

As such, faith is also about...*not living in Missouri* – I mean, I'm sure it's a wonderful place to live – but **what's their unofficial motto? *The Show-Me State*** - which is the OPPOSITE of faith. Says Paul in chapter 11, vs. 1 of Hebrews, ***Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things...NOT seen.***

So these are the two main characteristics of faith:

- holding fast and...moving forward;
- standing secure and...stepping out;
- being rooted deeply and...willing to take that famous leap...which makes

Abraham and Sarah the perfect example of these two precepts: They were called by God to 1) **hold fast** to the Lord's promise that he:

- would give them a land to call their own,
- would make of them a great nation, and through them,
- would bless every family on the face of the earth (Genesis 12:1-3).

To accomplish all this...the two were asked to leave *everyone* and *everything* they knew...to 2) **step out** in faith, to wander and wait in faith, to make big mistakes as they tried to figure-out their faith...and only, finally, after so many, many, years of wrong turns and disappointed dreams...were they able to celebrate God's gift of faith that was brought to fruition in the tiny form of their son Isaac.

So it's **also** true that Faith is:

- a calling at times (think of an invitation or a supporting cheer),
- at other times, it's a dig in the ribs, a kick in the pants, perhaps, even, a poke with a cattle prod to *get moving*...

So, please take a few moments and *think/write* or *talk* with your neighbor about a time when circumstances required you to **cling tightly** to your faith, or a time when it drove you to take that famous **leap** – and I'd like to have 2-3 people volunteer to share...

[Music]

Some of us find a sense of spiritual peace when we're in a **place** that's secure, familiar, safe... Others of us are spiritually alive **only** when we're **moving forward**: facing challenges, looking for new places to explore, new people to meet, new problems to solve...

The truth is – the Church needs both types of people...those who help us feel at home so that we're secure and well-rooted...AND we need those who push us out of the nest so that we can learn to fly.



Which is exactly what good coaches should do – provide for their team a sense of security and belonging, even as they push the players to develop as individuals AND as a team. (That's a picture of Jill Ellis, the very successful coach of the U.S. women's soccer team, who just retired)

Another important skill of good coaches (in sports, school, music, dance or faith) is to know the difference between when to *critique* and when to *compliment*, when to *re-prove* and when to *ap-prove*, when to *praise* and when to *prod* ...

The same is true with God and us...for the fact of the matter is, we, ALL OF US, all people everywhere, are always exceptionally...human...

Thankfully, the Bible does a great job of holding up our “heroes of the faith” as ordinary people who *believe*...and *betray*; who are *honorable*...and *dishonorable*...who *defend*...and who *deny*...

1. **Abraham** lied about his beautiful wife Sarah – twice claimed that she was his sister, because he feared that a king would kill him and take her as his own wife. Abraham was NO HERO...but, he was a person of faith.
2. And **Sarah** LAUGHED at GOD when she heard the Lord’s message that she, as a 90+ year old woman, would have a baby. Sarah was not a hero...BUT she was a person of faith...
3. Jacob tricked Esau...
4. Moses murdered an Egyptian...
5. David seduced Bathsheba and had her husband killed...
6. Judas betrayed, Peter denied, and no one believed that Jesus would rise from the dead...



That’s the story of our very human nature, right?

The Apostle Paul, in I Corinthians 13:12, addresses this challenge of living by faith. He says, *Now we see in a mirror dimly...but then we shall see face to face...*

I love that image – other translations say it a little differently, with words like *now we see through a glass darkly*. I’m not sure if the picture on the screens is a pane of glass or a mirror, but either way – because it’s cloudy/frosty/dirty – we cannot see into it, or, through it, clearly.

And that, I believe, is a beautiful analogy (???)...of our experience of life – and faith... Because...what we are able to see...visually AND spiritually...is, and always will be, incomplete – and – tainted by sin.

So, please take a few moments to *think/write* or *talk* with your neighbor about a time when you felt empty of faith, or doubted God’s promise, or felt burdened by life’s pain – and I’d like to have 2-3 people volunteer to share...

[Music]

*Now we see through a glass darkly, or in a mirror dimly...*

But that’s not the end of the sentence, is it? God never leaves us abandoned, alone, on the outside looking in...

Paul continues with a very important *but*: *but then we shall see face to face...*

Think of being reunited with a loved one who’s been on a long trip, or who lives across the country, or from whom you’ve been separated for far too long...

Before that moment when you *finally* get to see them face to face...what are you going to do?

I’m betting that at some point, you’re gonna take a look in a mirror, am I right?

**How many of you could get ready for...a reunion, or the day – to work or to play – without looking in the mirror???** One of the few blessings of being *bald* is that I pretty much don’t have to worry at all about how my hair looks... I can’t even remember the last time I didn’t like a haircut...but then I also can’t remember when I last *paid* for a haircut!!

That good, old, trustworthy mirror always shows us exactly who we are...

But...*what if we had a mirror that could show us what we WANT to see?*

Enchanted mirrors play a significant role in some of our favorite fairytales:

-In **Snow White**, the step-mother would say [chant it with me], “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the fairest one of all...”

-In **Beauty and the Beast**, a magical mirror would allow its user to see anything in life the person wished to see.

In **Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone**, a magical mirror allows its user to see...one's deepest desire, one's most powerful passion, the hungriest hope of one's heart...

Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing, right? I mean, what if your heart's desire was to end hunger, or bring about world peace, or usher in the time when Christ will make all things new???

The trouble is...that, if you're like me, our wholly human hearts would fail to embrace a cause that benefits **all** of humanity...until well AFTER we've satisfied our own personal agenda...[can I get an AMEN!?] Well, that's exactly what happened to the young, orphaned, Harry Potter.

Harry discovered that in this magical mirror, he could see, **actually see** his mom and dad...which was his one true heart's desire – this little orphaned boy finally getting to see his mom and dad...

It's a pretty innocent desire, right? It's as...American as...*Mom/Dad* and *Apple Pie*. But...seeing our heart's desire will most likely come with a cost...as all such diversions do...

### **Can a Harry Potter fan explain to us what happens to a person who looks into this magical mirror and sees their heart's desire?**

When a person sits in front of that mirror and can actually see their heart's desire...they forget everything else, they lose their will to live out their calling in life. When you can see your heart's desire, what reason would you ever have to get up and go to work, or mend your neighbor's fence, or fix your children's supper...???

That almost happens to Harry Potter...almost, but not quite. Because, as difficult and lonely as his childhood was, Harry was also surrounded by people who loved him. They encouraged him to succeed. They prodded him to work hard.

They helped the boy see his potential for moving beyond living only to satisfy his basic longings and urges – and move forward to embrace his place in the struggle of good against evil.

And in that story of a little orphan boy finding his way through life – well, I’m thinking that’s partly your story – and mine – as well!?!?

If we only live for ourselves, if we seek only our heart’s desire, if we pursue only happiness in a self-centered way – two things will happen: we’ll never find true happiness and we’ll never find true peace.



Turn in your bulletins to that bible passage from Hebrews and look at all the people mentioned there:

By faith ABEL, by faith NOAH, by faith ABRAHAM and SARAH, and the list doesn’t stop at v. 16 – on and on it goes through the rest of the chapter.

And here, I think, is Paul’s point. Everyone mentioned embraced those two basic truths of living a life of faith: they held fast to God’s promises AND they moved forward trusting that God would not only lead them to the Promised Land, but would also put them to work using their gifts to bless the world around them.

In short, God has equipped us not to hide behind the walls of a fortress deep and mighty, where life is always safe, secure and...stale...

Instead, God is constantly calling us to use our gifts to help usher in a time when faith, hope and love abide...in the promise of Jesus Christ, for all people, everywhere.

Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.