

Faith as Assurance of Things Hoped For

August 7, 2022

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

There is nothing more basic in Christian faith than – faith. It sounds simple, but the way we use the word is not. Most people equate faith with belief. To have faith is to believe certain things. Another common use of the word faith is to equate it with religion. We say that we are part of the Christian faith, as opposed to being Jewish or Muslim or of some other world religion. This use of the word “faith” is perhaps the most narrow and limited of its several possibilities. We could as easily substitute “brand” or “type” inviting comparison to something else.

A third common use of the word “faith” is a combination of the first two, as when we try to encourage someone by saying, “keep the faith” or just “have faith.” “Hold on to what you believe to be true,” or “embrace what you have been given.” It is a rather vague thing, this kind of faith. We might just as well say, “Hang in there!” or “Never give up!” to boost the spirits of another. But as far as the letter to the Hebrews is concerned, faith is neither belief nor brand nor boost. It is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.”

Eugene Peterson paraphrases our text this way in *The Message*: “The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see.”

Frederick Buechner says, “Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a ‘position on’ than a ‘movement toward,’ less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting. By faith we understand ... that the madness and lostness we see all around us and within us is not the last truth about the world. Faith is the eye of the heart, and by faith we see deep down beneath the face of things, that the world is God’s creation even so. It is [God] who made us and not we ourselves, made us out of [God’s] peace to live in peace, out of [God’s] light to dwell in light, out of [God’s] love to be above all things loved and loving. That is the last truth about the world.” (*Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*)

In the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, faith was a key word, part of the Reformers’ slogan that meant to distinguish their teachings from that of their Roman Catholic foils. Luther and others quoted the text, “the righteous shall live by faith,” and emphasized “justification by grace through faith.” They contrasted living by faith with living by works, doing certain pious things to win God’s favor. “Works righteousness.” The Reformers taught that faith was a matter of the heart, a matter of inner trust and openness to God, rather than something external, physical or ritual. The Reformers pointed to an invisible church, the true church made up of those whose hearts were in the right place. Being the church, living by faith, then, wasn’t about fingering prayer beads, climbing stone staircases on one’s bare knees or buying indulgences. These outward expressions only showed the visible church. What mattered to God was the invisible church, made up of individuals who had faith on the inside.

Faith does have to do with the unseen, the invisible. Recall the scene across a deep chasm in the third Indiana Jones movie, “The Last Crusade.” Indy has to cross the treacherous divide to save

the life of his father, played by Sean Connery. “Junior” is after the well protected Holy Grail that is both the ultimate artifact for any archeologist and the only hope for his dying dad. Clues say that the worthy grail-finder must take a leap of faith into the chasm, so Indy steps out on what proves to be an invisible bridge. When he understands that the bridge is there, though unseen, he tosses a handful of sand across the span. Now he can see it and be confident that the invisible bridge really is there. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” “Trust and verify,” President Reagan said of the nuclear treaty with the Soviet Union.

We were reminded last week of the bridge collapse in Minneapolis on I-35 some years ago. Our son, Aaron, was living there at the time, and was only seconds away from the bridge as it went down. He had been a bit delayed leaving work that day or he might have been on the span when it fell. He saw the dust cloud and back-up ahead as he approached the last exit before the bridge. We visited him a few weeks later and saw the aftermath up close. Ever since, we pay more attention to bridges as we are crossing them.

Sometimes taking things on faith gets us into trouble. The integrity of infrastructure is not something to take for granted. Bridges and roads and tunnels are like our teeth, ignore them and they will go away. We ought to have learned with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that we cannot take for granted that our leaders always know what they are doing. With the consequences of global warming, or weirding, we must verify that our dams and levees are up to snuff. We need to read the fine print when entering into contracts “in good faith” to be sure that our partners can’t deceive us. We take a lot on faith, but it is not faithless to question and be clear about what we are investing in. Not everything is worthy of the “full faith and credit of the United States” referenced in the Constitution.

But faith as trust is not a bad thing. The question is in what or in whom do we place our trust. The Bible says that the only always true and trustworthy covenant partner is God. The Ten Commandments begin with the clear expression of this: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:2-3) Abraham and Sarah are lifted up as examples of faith because they trusted in this God. They did not live to see God’s promises fulfilled, but they trusted God anyway.

Our faith is about keeping faith with the one who keeps faith with us, the one who is faithful and true. Our faith is about trusting and being loyal to the God who created all things. Our faith is about trust and loyalty to the God who called Abraham and Sarah out of Mesopotamia, cradle of civilization, and promised them a new homeland and descendants as the stars of heaven and grains of sand on the seashore. Our faith is about keeping faith with the God who is faithful and just, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, who brought us out of the land of Egypt and the house of bondage. Faith is, as one theologian put it, a dual bond of loyalty and trust; we maintain loyalty to the one who is loyal above all others, and we trust the one who is trustworthy above all others. This is what is meant by faith.

One of the false myths we live by is that we are self-sufficient, independent individuals. I suppose if we ate only the food we raised, wore only the clothing we sewed, used only the goods we made, and schooled our children at home with the materials that we ourselves had written on

paper with quills and ink of our crafting, then perhaps we could honestly say that we are self-sufficient individuals. But the fact of the matter is that we are interdependent through and through. Without trust that others will come through, and without trust that others who depend on us will not be disappointed, our lives collapse like that Minneapolis bridge. If we cannot trust that drivers will stop at red lights, as we have it in a frightening trend now in Milwaukee these days, no one is safe! Without basic faith that some social norms will be followed, chaos prevails. Living by faith makes our lives possible and gives them meaning. And we can live by faith in lots of different things, some more worthy of our trust and devotion than others.

Reformer John Calvin's monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion* dedicates more words to faith than to any other subject. Calvin thought of faith as "the firm knowledge of God's benevolence toward us." The assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen has to do with the certainty that God cares about us and will not abandon us. This is a faith worth keeping. This is the "firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living."

The language of the first question and answer in the *Heidelberg Catechism* perhaps says it best:

Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A: That I, with body and soul, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ...

This is the place where faith as loyalty and trust begins.

A prayer by Thomas Merton (*Thoughts in Solitude*):

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Amen.

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Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12: 32-34
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