

Hebrews 11:1-13

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³ 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.

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. ⁵ By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. ⁷ By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

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

¹³ All 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.

Sermon: Faith Matters

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This week our lectionary points us toward Dorcas, the dead seamstress. A cheerful little tale, especially on Mother's Day. It does have a happy ending in that she was raised from the dead, although that could also be seen as wresting her from the arms of Jesus to put her back to work. Perspective is everything when we peer back into the wild times of the early church.

While I was looking into Dorcas' story I was also continuing to work on a series of presentations for an upcoming youth retreat the theme of which is 'can you be a Christian without going to church.' Lots of issues here of identity, community, calling, worship, sacramentality, culture, responsibility, and the like. So this is the direction that today's sermon will run. We're going to leave Dorcas in peace – we'll let her rest while we look at some other issues.

One key topic is the distinction between our religion and our faith – on the one hand the structure and institution and regulation, and on the other personal piety and relationship.

We're all aware of the dangers of placing too much emphasis on religious expression alone – legalism, intolerance, the need to always be right.

Faith is a little bit harder to talk about though – there is a subjective nature to faith that makes it amorphous – hard to pin down. It is quite common these days to consider that you can believe what you want, and I can believe what I want, and in the end it doesn't really matter as long as we both agree on the price of bread. I don't know if I can buy into that philosophy.

It's not that I think that all people should be compelled to believe the same thing. That's not helpful to anyone. But I do think that faith is something substantively different than mere preference. Our faith is core to how we apprehend and understand the reality around us, and that in turn influences reality.

Consider this: modern science and technology are a direct result of ideas found in the Hebrew Testament. Now you won't find Bohr's law or Plank's constant in the book of Genesis, but here's what you will find. 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' That is the first of many references to God's continuing action of creating an ordered universe.

He set the foundations of the earth, the boundaries of the sea. He created the lights in the sky, the seasons, a time and a place for everything. He created life, each after it's own kind. His crowning achievement was Eve, carefully placed into the lush garden of Eden. All of this was done through his word – His word of information, structure, and meaning.

Compare this to other belief systems of that time or others. Tiamat and Mardok, the Greek pantheon, the Roman gods, Odin and his gang, the millions of gods and avatars in the Hindu tradition – what these other faith systems have in common is that there are many gods fighting and competing among themselves. Human beings are at best secondary characters trying to earn favour with gods who don't really care for them at all.

Floods and famines come and go, as do prosperity and poverty. All of this happens at the will of any of the many gods, and their wills as well as their influence changes daily. The world is capricious and unpredictable.

Is it any wonder that it was the Judeo/Christian tradition that was the source of modern scientific thinking? Beginning with the premise that the universe is ordered and intelligible led to the establishment of the great universities which led to the Enlightenment, Romanticism, the scientific revolution, industrialization, and pretty much everything you see before you.

I don't say this to denigrate other cultures. They too have value – the Greeks had their philosophy and democracy, the Romans had military discipline and an organized political structure, the Arabs numerical systems and astronomy. They've got good things going for them, but it's pretty clear that our modern culture distinguished by knowledge, technology, and individuality – for better or for worse - is a product of Christianity.

And the foundation upon which all that we have built is belief. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God. By faith we believe that this world that we live in has order and that we can understand that order if we look hard enough. We believe that our harvest does not depend on the outcome of some dispute between minor gods but upon a proper interaction between seed, soil, water, and light. Belief that though randomness and chaos exist they do not rule the day.

All this is a rather long winded way of saying that what we believe matters. If the way that we look at the world actually shapes the world, then it's not at all the case that you can believe what you want to, and I'll believe what I want to, and we'll all be ok. Faith and belief are much more important than that.

There are of course those who would disagree and claim that they don't have a faith system and are doing just fine, thank you very much. I would encourage those folks to look a little deeper. We all have a faith system; sometimes it's just a little bit hidden or camouflaged.

All of us build our lives upon faith. Humans are faith-seeking beings. That foundation of faith, can be different for each person. Some of us embrace a loving, forgiving God of grace as our core belief. Some put their faith in the innate goodness of the human being. Some people's faith is placed in the supremacy and superiority of their country in the form of the extreme nationalism that we see in both the U.S. and in many other countries. Some put their faith in progress, in technology, in Apple – or maybe these days more in Tesla. Elon Musk is the new messiah who will lead us to a promised land on Mars where we'll all drive electric roadsters. Everyone has a foundational faith, and to a certain degree that faith will determine your reality.

If our faith is in our country, the demand is that we will place the needs of the country above our own; that we will sacrifice time, money, family, and even our own lives if our country requires it. I was at a soldiers' memorial yesterday in which it was precisely this virtue of dying for country that was being celebrated.

If our faith is in the capitalist economic system, as many people's faith is, we will sacrifice our lives by spending the bulk of our time in the pursuit of money.

If our faith is in technology and science – which is a weirdly vague and undirected sort of thing to put faith into, though that doesn't seem to stop us – then we'll blindly follow all those trends as well.

The end result is that the object of our faith demands our all. It will direct our lives. This being the case, then faith is something we ought to think about. It should be a conscious decision that we make, not just something that we fall into by default.

That is one thing that I quite like about the Christian faith. It's pretty clear right up front about counting the cost of discipleship. It's not a bait and switch where we get gradually sucked in – commandment number one is 'You shall have no other gods over me.' Right from the beginning we know that this is going to be an all or nothing deal. 'You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.'

The Bible explicitly states that what we believe will rule over our entire being, so we had best put some thought into it and make sure that we are aligning ourselves with the highest good that we know of. I find this honesty to be refreshing – it's a dose of reality that is welcome indeed.

Here's where we are so far. Our belief system both reflects and shapes the world in which we live. What we believe will demand our allegiance and rule over us for our lifetimes. So it's critically important that our faith is put into the highest truth and the highest good. For Christians, the highest truth and the highest good is the Triune God of Abraham; the Alpha and Omega, Creator of all things visible and invisible.

The trouble that we run into is that we are finite beings trying to grasp an infinite God. The God whom we seek, the God who seeks us, is far too large to fit into a few pounds of grey matter. Our brains that rely on the seen world cannot fully grasp the nature of the unseen God. There will always be an uncertainty that is part of our faith in God, and this uncertainty cannot be removed; it can only be accepted.

This is why the writer of the letter to the Hebrews wrote that 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' There is an unknown and unknowable component to faith. This is what differentiates faith from fact.

Does this mean then that faith is blind? I don't think that it is. Faith's vision is incomplete – through a looking glass darkly is how Paul describes it, but it is far from blind.

To go back to the beginning of the sermon, faith in an ordered universe finds its roots in revelation. God's word tells us that the universe was created with thought and intention. As we stepped out in this faith we found it to be true – the more we looked, the more we found evidences of structure and order, and our faith in an ordered universe grew and was confirmed.

The reading from Hebrews recounts the stories of Noah and Abraham – both of whom were given a revelation from God – build a ship in the middle of the desert, in the case of Noah. Take your barren wife and set out into the wilderness was what Abraham was told. Both got a revelation, and when they walked the path of that revelation in faith their faith was justified and confirmed. Their faith grew, and the effects of faith on their lives were multiplied to the point that their faith has an impact on our lives today.

Faith matters.

Now we get to the really hard part. We hear in church often that we are to believe in Jesus Christ, and that through this we will be saved. What does this mean? What does it mean to believe in Jesus? Satan believes that Jesus is the son of God – so too the demons in the New Testament. Are they saved, whatever that means?

If faith shapes our world and rules our lives then what exactly is it that we are believing about Jesus that has such a profound impact on us? I think this is a question that many of us would have a hard time answering.

I won't claim to have a comprehensive answer for you this morning, but I'd like to offer a starting point.

If Jesus is God incarnate, sent to earth, then that means that God is reaching out to us. If God reaches out to us, then God cares for us. Compare that to squabbling demi-gods or an uncaring universe and see if that begins to shape your reality.

We killed the Son of God – slapped away the hand of peace – but the resurrected Jesus declared that God would not be so easily rebuffed; that God would not give up on us. God is persistent in his caring.

Furthermore, God sent his Spirit to empower the church to take up Jesus' mission to show people that God cares for them and will not give up on them even when they give up on themselves.

In the beginning God created with intention and with purpose. He made a universe that is intelligible and of good order, then lovingly created human beings, breathed life into them and placed them into his creation to care for it and tend to it.

Jesus confirms that God is still interested in his creation, still cares, and that we still have a role to play. God has not wavered in his intention. We don't know God's full intention – we see in part.

Because of our incomplete understanding, 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.'

We aren't going to know it all. But here is what I offer as a foundation for faith, as revealed in Scripture. Start with the fact that you have purpose, you have value, and that you are loved; as is your neighbour, and as is all of creation. Start living your life with that as your understanding of Jesus' message, and see how that starts to shape reality.

Then it truly will be on earth as it is in heaven.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.