

SCRIPTURE

Psalm 50:1–8

Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16

Luke 12:32-40

SERMON: What is faith?

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. What does that even mean? I talked a little about it with the kids in the context of trust – that at times we can trust in that which we can't see. In the example I used of following instructions it had more to do with trusting a person that we know more than actually trusting the unseen thing itself, but it's still a good starting point.

Trust is something that kids are generally good at – they will take our hand and follow us wherever we lead them. That being the case, we have some serious responsibilities to ensure that we are deserving of that trust, that we have the wisdom to lead them.

So for the grownups I'd like to continue to talk about faith as the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen, but we're going to go a little deeper.

The writer of Hebrews gave us a list of faithful men. To that list we can certainly add women like Ruth, who was an exemplar of faithfulness to her mother-in-law Naomi; Mary who in faith responded to God with 'Your will be done – let it be as you have said;' and that same Mary along with Mary Magdalene and Salome who braved the Roman guards to attend to the body of Jesus after he had been killed.

Lots of examples of faith in our bible – shown by men, women, and children alike. Did all these faithful people lead charmed lives of abundance? Did their faith reward them with a life of ease?

It would be a pretty short sermon if I could just say yes. Live faithfully, and you will be healthy, wealthy, and all who meet you will wish they could be just like you. Unfortunately that is not the case, and is not what the bible illustrates for us, despite what you may hear from some televangelists.

Superficially there is some truth there; by living through honest labour and not seeking shortcuts we can avoid being conned or scammed; by not indulging in sexually immoral practices we can avoid most STDs and leaving children in every city we visit. Likewise, not lying, cheating, stealing, or any of that kind of behaviour will minimize the chances of the neighbours showing up one night with torches and pitchforks.

Our lives still won't be guaranteed to be luxurious; bad things can and will still happen, but at least we can minimize the extent to which we sabotage our own lives, and that's not a bad strategy – it's at least a start.

But the truth is that living a life of faithfulness means much more than simply following rules. It means following God. We're back to the trust issue again, about relationship. You see, neither Ruth, nor Mary, nor Noah, nor Abraham, nor Abel, or any of the giants of faith in the bible were declared faithful because they followed all the rules.

For Abraham and Ruth, being faithful meant leaving their homes and people behind and venturing into strange and foreign lands. For Elijah, being faithful meant daring to stand before a queen and hundreds of angry priests and having the audacity to call down fire from heaven. For Noah, being faithful meant spending years and all of his family's wealth building a massive boat in the middle of a desert.

For these people, being faithful meant doing something far in excess of following rules. They had to have some serious convictions in things unseen to make the bold moves that they did. Not only did they need conviction in things unseen, but they also had to figure out how to deal with all the things that they did see that were in opposition to them.

How do you think Elijah felt as he looked out at the hundreds of Baal priests, covered in blood and gore, and then turned eyes heavenward? Trembling? Thinking that this is pretty likely to be his last act?

How about Noah? The neighbours are complaining about yet another failed crop due to the ongoing drought and wonder how they are going to survive and Noah pipes up with 'well, the boat's coming along pretty good, eh?' Do you think he wasn't a total pariah? Mocked and belittled by everyone for miles around?

What of Abram leaving everything behind at the age of 75? His walk of faith didn't make his life any easier; he left home and wandered in hostile territory for years, warring with kings, struggling to find a land for his people.

The Israelite slaves stepped out in faith, walked through a parted sea, then spent a generation in the desert; Daniel's faith got him tossed into a pit of lions; and let's not forget what Jesus' walk of faith looked like – struggling to drag a heavy cross down a blood-spattered dusty road.

It seems pretty clear that living a life of faith is not a direct recipe for a carefree life of ease. In fact, if we talk about things seen and unseen then we would have to conclude that what we do see about these faithful people in the bible is that they faced some serious challenges that they simply could have avoided if they had merely followed the crowd. Their faithful living doesn't seem all that advantageous or desirable to us.

So the question becomes then 'What is the unseen thing that they were after?' If their visible lives appear complicated and difficult, what other thing were they trying to attain? Jesus said in this morning's reading 'Don't put your faith only in the things that you can see and touch. There is a much bigger reality out there than the things you own; a much more absolute truth than what you perceive tangibly around you.'

Could this be true? Is there more to reality, and more to life, than the things that we can see, feel, and taste? And not just whether there is more than just this 'stuff,' but is it possible that the intangible reality is more real or more true than our material reality?

But isn't that just fantasy? Wishful thinking? Superstition? Isn't faith simply irrational, pre-scientific thinking – intellectually irresponsible or dishonest? These questions take us back a few months to our visit by the Rev. Dr. Tim Reddish who spoke to us about the interplay between faith and science.

The scientific method is a relatively new way of apprehending the world; it's really the mark of modernity. In a nutshell, the scientific method involves making a hypothesis – offering an explanation of how or why something works – and then testing it to see if it is in fact a reliable and adequate explanation. If necessary, the original hypothesis is modified and retested – calibrated until the explanation matches the observable reality consistently.

It's a good method – it has yielded great results and has increased our knowledge and mastery over the physical world in fantastic ways. Most of the things that are in your home right now did not exist a generation ago, and all are the result of engineers applying the scientific method of problem solving to make our lives more convenient. The scientific method is a great human invention and has changed our world in incalculable ways. Granted, not all the changes are beneficial, but I'm quite sure that we will use the scientific method to fix those things that we didn't get right the first time through.

Which brings me to my next point. In some ways, the great success of the scientific method is its Achilles heel. Because we've seen such great progress in how we are able to measure and manipulate the physical world we largely perceive everything through the lens of material reductionism. Simply put, our current worldview tells us that if we can't measure it, it doesn't exist. We no longer believe that there is any way to understand the world in which we live apart from its physically observable attributes. Triumphant science tends to be dismissive of all other epistemologies; we could call it empirical imperialism.

We have forgotten that there are other ways to understand the world, and that there are truths that cannot be quantified or plotted on a graph.

Take Melville's *Moby Dick* for example. I mentioned its opening line a while back so let's come back to it. If we examine this book we can determine what type of fibres the pages are made of, the quality of the ink, date of printing. OCR algorithms can tell us how many times the word whale appears in the work.

Science can tell us about the physical reality of the book, but material reductionism can not even hint at the great truths expressed by the novel. Like how Ahab's single minded obsession with killing the white whale leads to a life of desperation that consumes both himself and all the other characters of the book, aside from Ishmael who alone survives to tell the tale.

What is more real, or more true? The measurable, observable attributes of the book, or the more intangible ideas expressed by it? If you destroy the book, can you destroy the idea? Can an idea even be destroyed? Does that make an idea more real than physical reality?

That's an interesting thought. All the observable, measurable objects in this room existed as an idea before they were fashioned out of wood or metal. So what is real? What is reality? Is it that which is seen, or that which is unseen? Maybe both?

As we are both body and spirit, perhaps we are meant to utilize both physical and spiritual methods of navigating the world. Maybe this is what those heroes of faith in the bible discovered. Instead of resting in a purely physical understanding of the world, they dimly perceived spiritual callings and then followed them.

They not only saw what was, but also saw what could be, or perhaps more accurately what should be. These two modes of thinking – material and spiritual – can help us answer not just what, but why; the presence of something, and its purpose; existence, and meaning; practicality and potential.

Ultimately, scientific materialism is descriptive – it tells us what exists. Faith is prescriptive – it tells us what to do with what exists. We can't live with one and not the other.

A genuine faith does not fly in the face of reason, though it may seem at first to be counter-intuitive. After all, if faith is conviction in things unseen, we can hardly expect our faith based decisions to be encouraged by the surrounding culture. That doesn't mean that we have to be completely crazy either.

I had my own Abraham moment coming here to Simcoe. All the observable signals in my life told me to stay in London. My family was in London, we owned a house in London that I had poured heart and soul into customizing for our purposes. Kyoungsoo had a stable job with great benefits, which would make us a two income family which would be great for addressing the \$50 000 in student loans that I had. And I had an offer from a church in London that was looking for a pastor. Everything pointed to our family living, working, and ministering in London.

But I couldn't sleep. Night after night St Paul's appeared in my dreams. I knew that as much as London made sense in all practical criteria, it was no longer my home. God had other plans.

I had to act on knowledge that could not be quantified, catalogued, or confirmed in any earthly way. When we act in faith, when we rely upon that which is not seen, we will face challenges and opposition. But what is the alternative?

If we reduce rationality to mere physics we live impoverished lives – we imprison ourselves in Plato's cave, analyzing the view with great accuracy and utility, but ultimately with futility. We have to satisfy ourselves with a physical description of a book without grasping its meaning. We content ourselves with facts, rather than truths.

What we discover once we attempt to step out in faith is that faith is not sub-rational; it is not a negation of reality. Rather, faith is supra-rational; faith is on the far side of reason and inclusive of it. Faith is beyond reason precisely because faith is a response to the God who has revealed himself, and God is, by definition, beyond our capacity to grasp, to see, to fully understand.

Faith is the moment of trust that comes after we have exhausted what reason has to offer. It leads us to that which is beyond the realm of direct experience and reason; that which gives life its very meaning.

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