

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: What is the church Part III – What is living in faith?

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

I've got a sermon in my head about identity, about purpose, about listening to God and finding our place in the Kingdom of God – but we're not there yet. It's a little like coming to church in the morning; I can see the tallest tower of the church while I'm still pretty far away, but there's still some travelling to do to get here. It's the same with this identity sermon – although it's been in me for a few weeks, there is still some travelling to do before we arrive to it.

To review the journey so far, we looked at how the role of church in our society has changed in the past fifty years. The message was that instead of reacting to this change in a defensive way, we should instead be actively seeking what God is doing in the present and discerning the new role that God is calling us to in the future. The core of that sermon is that God is doing something right now, and we should be excited about it.

The second week was about distinguishing between religion and faith. Like the first week, this sermon focused on that contrast between looking behind, and looking ahead. Religion focuses on the past, on the way things have been done before, while faith is forward looking. Faith is our pursuit of the living God who is still creating, who is active in our lives. The core event of our faith is in the resurrection - life where there should be death – so faith entails a wild hope for the future.

Last week I spent quite a bit of time talking about the dangers of placing too much emphasis on living a religious life but I didn't spend as much time talking about faith – what faith is, what faith does. What does faith look like in the life of God's people? This is what we'll be talking about today.

Hebrews 11 tells us that faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. That's a good start, but it's a little hard to understand on its own.

I've never seen my brother's apartment in Paris. He's been doing pretty extensive renovations on it and posting the pictures to facebook, so there's some photo evidence, but I've never actually been there myself – looked through the windows, touched the stones, or smelled the wood.

I've never been to a NASCAR race.

I've never seen a calf being born, although a few weeks back when I was driving there was a radio station that was giving live updates on the birth of a calf somewhere – I'm not sure why this calf was newsworthy, but for some reason it seemed to be kind of a big deal.

The point of all of this is that although I've never seen Paris, a NASCAR race, or the birth of a calf, I do believe that these things exist. These are beliefs of mine, but these are not articles of faith. Faith runs deeper than belief.

The things that I believe can change, and if they do change they don't fundamentally affect who I am. If it turns out that NASCAR is some kind of hoax, or that calves are not born but are hatched, I might be surprised, but I will continue to live my life as I normally would. Not much at all would change.

Faith is different. Faith is not a belief in a particular fact that remains in isolation from everything else. Faith is a belief that forms the core of our lives – faith is a foundational truth upon which everything else rests.

All of us build our lives upon faith. Humans are faithful beings. Not all people will want to admit this, but the truth is that faith forms the core of every human being. Each of us has a faith foundation upon which everything else depends, and if that core is shaken we are lost; we descend into either despair or cynicism – we no longer function.

That foundation, our ultimate concern, 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 – which really is more of a lifestyle statement than just a company, or people may put their faith in the belief that their government really does exist to serve and care for them. Everyone has a foundational faith.

The key difference between faith and belief is that faith makes an unconditional demand of the faithful. It demands the total surrender of whoever accepts that claim of faith – while it also promises total fulfillment to the faithful.

This may sound kind of extreme – maybe even a little harsh – this unconditional demand of the faithful. But the evidence is there. All faith requires sacrifice. If your faith is in your country, the demand is that you will place the country above yourself; that you will sacrifice time, money, family, and even your own life if your country requires it.

If your faith is in the capitalist economic system, as many people's faith is, you will sacrifice by placing the pursuit of money above the needs of your family – you will sacrifice your time, your labour, and postpone gratification to build more and more capital.

Even your favourite tv show demands that you stop what you're doing and pay attention, and nobody else is allowed to speak or interrupt while the show is on.

If God is your foundational faith you will sacrifice your life to him. Deuteronomy 6.5 says 'You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.' God demands all of us, our whole being.

This is where faith differs from belief. If my *belief* in calves being born turns out to be false, it doesn't change my day to day life or behaviour. I'll still cook roast beef the way I always have – I don't really care where it comes from.

But, if my *faith* is shaken then my whole world falls apart. Faith is an act of our entire personality. It happens right in the center of our lives and includes all its elements. It is the most centered act of the human mind; faith is the core aspect of our existence – everything we are and everything we do stems from our faith.

Faith is everything. And yet, so many people are not aware of this. Especially for those whose faith is grounded in nationalism, humanism, capitalism – any *ism* really – most of them would declare that they do not have faith; that they are somehow above faith.

I constantly have this discussion with my brother. He is a humanist, a rationalist, and thinks that faith is a product of a weak will, that Christians are unthinking slaves. I point out to him that his atheism is in fact a faith system in itself; it's just a faith system that does not have God as its object. When I say this he gets angry and defensive.

However, these two points that my brother raises are commonly held beliefs of many non-religious people: that faith is the result of a weak will and that those with faith are slaves. But, these are complete and utter fabrications that don't bear up to any serious examination.

I'm going to demonstrate to you that faith in God can only be a product of a strong and intentional will, and that Christians live much more freely than those who are unwittingly trapped by other worldly *isms*.

First of all – the will. Most people live by faith, but they have never made a conscious decision to do so. They don't really know what their faith is, and so many would deny they have any faith at all. Yet, the object of our faith demands our complete surrender. This means that even those people who think they have no faith are already surrendering to something – they are giving up their lives to something without even thinking about it. Somewhere along the line these people gave themselves over to what we would call a false god – materialism, nationalism, consumerism.

But, true Christian faith is an act of the will. We aren't born with it – even if we are born into and raised in a Christian household, at some point in our faith journey we have to choose to be Christians.

Now, it is possible to live a religious life where we obey the rules and show up to church every Sunday just because it's what is expected. Perhaps we've never really thought about our reasons for coming here. If that is the case, then we're not really any different than those who unthinkingly subscribe to nationalism or materialism. We're just going along to get along, and we'll find that we've merely surrendered to public opinion, not to God.

But true Christian faith is not faith in the authority of the church or a submission to peer pressure; it is a grounding faith in the ultimate authority of Jesus, who is God himself. True faith is the act of submission of us finite beings being grasped and turned towards the infinite God. It's a strange state in which we allow ourselves to become aware of the divine infinity that participates in our human finitude, and expands us beyond the limitations of our earthly selves. This is what we call transcendence. Faith is an experience of the holy.

But faith will always remain uncertain; we are finite beings receiving an experience of the infinite. The God whom we seek, the God who seeks us, is far too large to fit in our limited minds. Our brains that rely on the seen world cannot fully grasp the nature of the unseen God. There is an uncertainty that is part of our faith in God; this uncertainty cannot be removed, it can only be accepted. Every existential truth contains insecurity; doubt will always be a part of faith, like it or not. The element in faith that accepts this uncertainty is courage.

Courage is the daring self-affirmation of our own being in spite of the powers of nonbeing which are part of finite selves. Where there is daring and courage there is the possibility of failure, but the risk still must be taken – faith demands it.

What this means is that faith in God is not an unthinking act of a passive will as my brother believes. Faith in God is instead a supremely courageous act of the will. And if declaring our faith in God is a courageous act of the will, then our faith in God is the ultimate expression of our freedom. In courageously and willfully choosing to place our faith in God we Christians demonstrate a freedom of choice and volition that those trapped in the world with an unexamined faith cannot hope for or even comprehend.

Once we see our faith for what it is – a bold declaration of life and power - then we must act in that faith, we must live into our faith. In one of the many paradoxes of the Christian faith, our willing surrender to God liberates us and we become powerful agents of change in the world. Our faith comes alive.

I talked in the last couple sermons about looking for the new growth – discerning what God is doing in our lives and getting on board with his plan. The new growth will come in the form of people acting out of their faith. People becoming bold and courageous, stepping out of their comfort zones and following God’s calling.

I’m not going to use any names here because I didn’t ask these people if they’d like to be in this morning’s sermon, but I’ll tell just a little about their stories.

This week a man came to see me because he wanted to ask about baptism. Not for a new baby – a child or grandchild - but for himself. He could sense that God was calling him to a new level of relationship, a greater commitment. His faith is telling him that this free and courageous act, a public declaration of faith, would give him new life and a new beginning. This is exactly the kind of acting in faith that I’ve been talking about – a thought out and intentional decision to follow God. This is the new growth and the hope I was speaking of, not just for this one man, but for all of us. This new life is what God is doing in our midst.

Last week a young man was in the church looking for help. He had a few challenges, but the most pressing was that he was about to have his electricity shut off. One of our congregants gave him the money to cover his bill. A couple of days later he came to tell me that because of that act of kindness he was finally able to have his two year old son visit him for the first time in a year. New growth and hope for this young man indeed – I’ve talked to him a few times in the past week and it’s exciting indeed to see what is happening in his heart.

In a similar story, another one of our congregants was here when someone knocked on the church door asking for food. She didn’t realize that this is almost a daily occurrence here and she was so moved that she went and bought a number of gift cards from Food Basics to give away. Her faith demanded of her that she do something to help. Even after doing this she still feels a compassion and a need to do something to address this need in a more substantial way. These are the things that God is doing in our midst.

This is the new growth that we are looking for: people who are sensitive to the Spirit stirring within them, people with the courage to act on their faith. People who can feel the heart of Jesus.

Our faith in God sets us free. We all live in faith, we all base our lives on some kind of foundation. All of us serve at least one master.

The question that faces us is this: Do we unthinkingly surrender to something that our culture promotes like nationalism or capitalism and become slaves to these systems, or do we daringly place our faith in God, and live boldly as free men and women?

When we surrender to God, we surrender to the one who says ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.’

When we choose God, we choose the one who promises ‘I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.’

Jesus calls us to make the courageous free choice to deny ourselves and take up our cross, which is our surrender to God. He tells us that ‘those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’

This is our invitation. This is our choice. This is the life of faith.

Amen.