

Faith: Certainty of Doubt
Gen 15:1-6
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Begin with Prayer

When I say the word “faith,” what do you hear? We might think of images of pious priests and clergy in prayer, with confidence that they are doing God’s work. We might think of Holy Roller Christians crusading around college campuses and on street corners, handing out Bibles and evangelizing. If you’re of a certain age, you might think of Indiana Jones in the *Last Crusade* movie, just about to take his huge leap of faith. He has to get over the great chasm even though it is wide open beneath him. His faith required him to take the leap despite the lack of evidence that it is there. When he does, of course, the bridge suddenly appears. We have some cultural confusion over the role of faith in public life – election seasons prove that very nicely.

The dictionary defines faith as “belief not based on proof” or “belief in God or in the doctrines or teachings of religion.” These are fine definitions, but as a person of faith, they lack a certain something. Faith is our journey with God in poetry – not definable, but it affects us deeply.

People of faith have their own ways of describing faith.

- Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase. (Martin Luther King, Jr.)
- Faith is an oasis in the heart, which will never be reached by the caravan of thinking. (Khalil Gibran)
- Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith. (Paul Tillich)

Let me give you a somewhat superficial example about what I think faith is: faith is the hope that your football team will make it *all the way* to the Superbowl. For those of you from Chico, it is the hope that the high school *you* went to will win the Almond Bowl. Faith is keeping this possibility alive even against the odds because they've never done it before. If you were following my football team in the 80s and 90s, you'll know that that faith is hard won. The New Orleans Saints earned the name "the Aint's." Unfortunately for us, my cousins were die hard Cowboys fans. So faith was hard to maintain. Was I *certain* year after year that my team would skyrocket to the top? No. Did I *hope* that it would happen – yes. Did I have faith that it *could* happen one day? Yes. When we sing "Oh when the Saints go marching in" believe me, it has a lot of different meanings.

The book of Hebrews today that is our Scripture today has a famous quote about the nature of faith:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

What stands out to me in this verse is that faith is equated with hope.

The word "faith" in the New Testament has a rich tradition. This word in Greek is πίστις ("pistis") and the Latin word is "fides" – the root of the English word "fidelity." The ancient Greek people loved to tell stories and myths. One that most of us know is the story of Pandora's box. When Pandora opened up the box, many things that had been hidden from humanity flew out – illness, hardships, toil (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 53-105). πίστις flees from the box and

goes straight back up into heaven, abandoning humanity. (Theognis, *Fragment* 1. 1135). The ancient Greeks understood something basic about human nature – faith is difficult to grasp. This same word may also be translated as “trust,” “belief,” or “faithfulness.”

Our New Testament passage this morning comes from the book of Hebrews. It is one of those books that is often overlooked, which is too bad, because it offers pearls of wisdom for the Christian faith. We do not know who wrote this book, and it is written like a sermon – a long sermon – that is a meditation on the nature of Jesus Christ as a divine priest and king. Christians are sometimes known to ask: “Why do we need the Old Testament anyway?” There are many reasons. One is that Christians affirm the complete Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, as books that point toward God. Another is because the writers of the New Testament assume that we know the Old Testament. The book of Hebrews especially refers to characters in the Hebrew Bible with great care and zeal. In chapter 11, the author of Hebrews uses the story of Abraham. The story summarizes and interprets Abraham as a man of faith:

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.

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. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

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. 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.’

Hebrews praises the character of Abraham because he was a man who had faith even though a) he didn’t know where he was going, b) he had to live in tents all the time and c) he was so old when his heir was born that he was “as good as dead”. Do you notice a theme emerging from this example? Abraham never got to see his reward – descendants as innumerable as the grains of sand on a seashore – or even a house, for heaven’s sake. Did Abraham have certainty? I imagine not! Did Abraham have doubts? Probably so. Did Abraham ever try to take the situation into his own hands and take control, maybe fed up with the long wait? Yes, from time to time. Faith doesn’t mean that we know where things will end up. It means we know where we are called.

So let me ask you a question: What is the opposite of faith? Most of our gut response is to say “doubt”! And that’s fair enough. Because—we’re human. We have doubts. The opposite of faith is not actually doubt. Doubt keeps us in good check – and after all, without doubt, we can’t really believe. Doubt keeps us from making completely rash decisions from time to time – from using all the funds in the account to buy the mid-life crisis purchase or from eloping after the first date. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is in fact certainty.

Let me say that one more time, just for clarity and to let it sink in. The opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty. If you want to know more about this, you might check into the delightful theological and sometimes irreverent books of Anne Lamotte. The walk of faith that we are all on together is one where we are *allowed* to doubt. I run into Christians quite

often who panic when they have doubt and then they're thrown into even deeper crisis mode – believe me, if you're a doubter, you're in the right place. Because we walk the journey of doubts together. It is through our doubts that we mature as Christians. Example: a person of faith might ask “Did Paul write the letter to the Hebrews?” and then go about finding out the answer to this question. The person might seek out opinions on the question and figure out how to approach a variety of answers and conclude “Yes, Paul's the author” or “No, Paul's not” or “Maybe yes, maybe no – what's the impact on me individually?” But the moment of curiosity and doubt begins the journey – if we only stay at certainty, then we never get the fun of the process. Doubt is a complement, not a barrier to faith. We are not called to punish ourselves for doubts, we are called to celebrate them. Don't worry – it's part of the journey.

Let me start with an easy story from our own church. A few weeks ago, we held Vacation Bible School. What is the role of faith in Vacation Bible School? Faith is trusting the vision that it was time to have another Vacation Bible School. Faith was the hope that the community inside the church would respond. Faith was the hope that kids would attend and have a week of safe and loving Christian care. I know some of you had doubts – and you know what? Those doubts might have made a better Vacation Bible School because they helped hone the material; they helped challenge the team to set goals to reach more kids; they helped the adults realize that yes! This could happen. It's not always as clear cut as Vacation Bible School, of course. We have deep personal doubts and conflicts sometimes – but we walk those together.

Another example: Friday night I attended the installation of Rabbi Sara Abrams at Congregation Beth Israel, and we welcomed her to Chico. At the end of the service, she called forward all

clergy, Christian and Jewish, to participate in the blessing of the bread before the meal. This is a profound act of faith – to recognize that we all do holy work in different ways that we are called. Later, Mary Mitchell and Loretta and I stood together and expressed our hope, our deep desire, that at the end of time, all people may gather as one and worship together. This act of hope is a profound sign of faith for us. We have faith that God will make this happen. It is a hope for something unseen.

Faith also means that we do not know what comes next. The book of Hebrews says about Abraham specifically that he “died in faith without having received the promises.” I’ve got to say – I don’t like this. Do any of you like wandering around uncertain about what comes next? So faith is not about certainty, because we may not get exactly what we think we should. Faith is about doing what we’re called to do regardless of the results. Susan B. Anthony fought for the right for women to vote in the United States. She was a lifelong worker for abolition and women’s rights. Because of her faithful convictions, she was arrested and she refused to pay fines imposed upon her. Susan B. Anthony died in 1906. Women did not get the legal right to vote until 1920. But her legacy far outlives her. This is the picture that pops up on election day – women put their “I voted” sticker on Susan B. Anthony’s grave. Do you think her life was filled with doubts? I imagine so. But her faith kept her pushing forward – regardless of the results. Like Abraham, she did not live to see the results of her faithful efforts.

Now I want you all to catch on to the spirit of the football Season coming up. Can you sing along with me... “When the Saints go Marching in”...faith is not only hope that the Saints can

recover their 2009 winning season. Faith is the certainty that New Orleans is more than Katrina. No one that saw New Orleans in the first several years after Katrina could say with certainty what would happen – but it's a city that can't be stopped. Those working with faith helped rebuild the city. The spirit of the Saints football team helped capture the hope of New Orleans and Louisiana in the aftermath of this hurricane. We cultivate our faith to look for the long term.

Faith requires us to look in one direction. Any guesses which one that is? Yes, you've got it – forward. The book of Hebrews has something to say about this:

¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

That's right – the book of Hebrews talks about how faith required Abraham to look forward – otherwise, he would have high tailed it back home. FCC, guess what? We are called to do the same. Where are we being called to take a step of faith?

We, as in FCC of Chico, have been taking steps of faith lately. This church has identified itself as a place of healing and a safe space for people to walk a faith journey. In fact, some of you who were at the healing service that we had with the Brazilian Spiritual Healers may be interested to know that they immediately identified this congregation as one that offers healing to the surrounding community. We are expanding our offerings of bereavement groups and creating space for spiritual direction and education. Mary Kearns is leaving today to receive

advanced training on bereavement for children and youth. YOU are someone who helps make this congregation a hopeful place. In this moment, where are we being called next?

Faith is listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. As we've been talking about for several weeks now, the fruits of the spirit are the result of our Christian walk with God. We have gently explored patience, kindness, peace and now faith. I've been emphasizing that the fruits of the spirit are different than gifts – fruits of the Spirit are what we cultivate with God on our spiritual journey. Isn't it interesting that faith is a fruit of the Spirit – not a prerequisite. Paul believes that faith is a result of our encounter with God. We don't start with faith – we may even start with our doubts. We do develop our faith as part of our walking daily with Christ and with each other.

Fruit of the Spirit

Will you join me in a brief time of meditation where we can let God speak to us about our own faith journey?

- Where is God calling you in your own faith?
- How is God calling this community to deeper faith?
- Listen to the verse from Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Where is God calling you to hopefulness in your faith?