

Sermon 8/11/2019

Have you ever sat in a worship service and thought to yourself, “Where’s the magic?” I don’t mean that when you come to worship you are expecting a magic show with a slick magician and his fine-looking assistant and rabbits that appear out of nowhere. You may wish that was going to happen this morning, but obviously it’s not. I have no desire to make a spectacle out of worship. What I do contend is that there ought to be a sense of expectancy when you come into this place that something special is going to happen.

I believe the eleventh chapter of *Hebrews* has that kind of magic. In it, the writer seeks to define the meaning of faith, and it’s clear that he believes there is magic in faith. He begins with a definition: “*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see . . .*” That’s a nice sounding definition, but it’s kind of abstract. What does he mean by that— “*Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see . . .*”?

Fortunately the writer does not stop with a dictionary definition. He shows us faith in action. “*This is what the ancients were commended for,*” he continues, “*By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*” That’s a little heavy, still. “*What is seen was not made out of what was visible.*” But the writer is just getting warmed up. He’s taking us back to that time when God said, “*Let there be light,*” and there was light.

Then, turning to the first chapters of the Bible, he begins with Abel and shows how Abel’s offering to God was more acceptable than Cain’s because of his faith. Then he deals with Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and even the harlot Rahab, and he shows us the importance of faith in their lives. Then he adds to these the names of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets who through faith “*conquered kingdoms, administered justice . . . shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies . . .*” (vv. 33-34) It is a stirring chapter filled with magic only God could perform.

We see that same magic in our brief lesson for today. The writer focuses on a 99-year-old patriarch named Abraham who discovers that his 98-year-old wife is pregnant. That’s pretty fantastic all by itself. Listen as he describes this elderly couple:

“*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going . . . And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children . . . And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.*”

A 98-year-old woman, way past childbearing years, bears a child whose 99-year-old father is “as good as dead” in the words of the writer of *Hebrews*. If that is not magic I would like to know what is! But it is not the kind of magic that a magician can perform. It is magic only God can perform. And it is magic that can be seen only through the eyes of faith.

Faith is belief in God: trust, reliance in him. However, it’s not only that God exists, but that God is present with us and is working for our best good. In other words, faith is trusting God in all things. You’ve probably seen the bumper sticker: “God is my co-pilot.” That’s the kind of faith the writer of *Hebrews* is describing. God is our co-pilot. “We won’t face anything that I can’t handle,” God says to us, “You might as well trust me to fly the plane.” That’s faith!

Do you believe that when you are flying through the air in a time of crisis that God is there, waiting to catch you? That’s faith. It is not simply certainty that there is a God; it is absolute assurance that God cares for you and is always working for your best good.

You don’t bring a toaster in for repair if you don’t have faith to bring along a loaf of bread. Faith in God is like that. Faith is assurance not only does God exist, but that he cares for you and will bring his plans for you to fruition. That brings us to the next thing that faith is—

Since we trust God, faith is also living in obedience to God’s will. Here’s where the rubber hits the road. Abraham didn’t just believe in the existence of God. Because he trusted God, Abraham went where God told him to go and did what God wanted him to do. He obeyed God.

Do you believe in God, we ask? “Of course I believe in God. Everybody believes in God.” Do you believe in Jesus Christ? “Well, of course I believe in Jesus Christ. I went to Sunday school. He was quite a person.” Have you ever fully committed your life to Jesus— enough so that you will commit all you are and all you have to him? “Now hold on there, I’m not a religious fanatic, if that is what you mean. But I’m a Christian. I believe.”

Is that what it is all about—simply saying, “I believe?” Somehow as I read these words from the letter to the *Hebrews*—as I read about the victories that were won and the persecutions that were endured— I cannot help but believe that faith is much, much more than simply suspending critical judgment and saying, “I believe.” The writer of *James* says, “*Even the demons believe— and shudder.*” (2:19)

If there doesn’t seem to be much magic in church today, maybe it is because we’re too satisfied dismissing sound empirical conclusions for an “inerrant” Bible, or an “infallible” Pope so things always seem certain, seem right. Faith is total commitment to God of all we are and all we hope to be through our acceptance of the teachings of one Jesus, the Christ.

This list of the heroes of the Old Testament provided by *Hebrews* is a list of persons who put their lives on the line because of their convictions about God. Faith is not simply intellectual assent to an idea; it is a life-changing choice to

walk where God would have you go. But there's one more thing we need to see—

Faith is that unshakable sense of trust that keeps us going through life's dark and difficult valleys. All of us walk through a valley under a dark shadow at some time in our lives. We all get discouraged at some time in our lives—no one is exempt. But that doesn't mean we give up—there is always a way out if we allow God's Spirit to guide us. Faith is a commitment to God of all we are and ever hope to be. Faith is an assurance that the God who created us is there with us in every battle we face. Faith is that unshakable sense of trust that keeps us going through life's dark and difficult valleys.

After listing all the heroes in faith, *Hebrews* says, "*All these persons died in faith....*" What a way to ruin a good story! In spite of their mighty faith they perished like the rest of us. Death, that indiscriminate leveler, got all of them in the end. But there is one thing more in our reading for today—

Faith is a promise that, as Abraham described it, we'll find our refuge in a "*city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*" We speak far less about the future than did our fathers and mothers. We are the secular society—our kingdom is the here and now. No wonder our lives exude so little magic. No wonder so many of us dread the process of aging and are haunted by the fear of death. How foolish we are to denigrate the most blessed hope that the Christian possesses. How shallow we are to conclude that life ends at the grave. But wait.... In the New Testament we are dealing with a different way of seeing life and death, a different view of time and eternity.

From the Christian perspective faith is not shattered by death. In truth, *death* is shattered by hope engendered *by faith*. Faith—to really be faith—always has a forward look, a positive expectation, an unquenchable *hope*. Such a spirit comes from a lifetime of commitment and trust. It doesn't happen overnight and it doesn't come easily. There are good days and there are bad, but there is always that conviction that no matter what, *life* goes on. Such faith is always active, not passive. Faith is—in spite of our critics—not a barbiturate to calm people down and make them docile; it is a trust in God that thrusts people into the thick of life. Faith puts us at odds with the folly and sin around us. Faith is not an escape but a new, profound, re-creative involvement.

Do you believe in God? (As the sign at *Banks Liquors* in Millville says: ***Everybody's Got To Believe Something— I Believe I'll Have Beer.***) Yes, we say, of course I believe. Do you have the faith that Abraham had—full trust in the promises of God? Do you believe that God will always be with you regardless of the obstacles you may face . . . even to eternity? That, my friends, is *faith*.

Faith is not acceptance of a creed or a set of propositions used chiefly to exclude or include; *faith* is an attitude—the conviction of God's unfailing love both now and for evermore.