

“Do We Place Faith in Something More?”

Friends, in person and at a physical distance, we have gathered for worship this morning, coming away from our daily patterns in order to focus energy on praising God, noticing our longings, reciting, and listening for a fresh Word of God in sacred texts. Let us now slow our pace even further for an extended moment of reflection. We can locate ourselves at the midpoint of summer, equidistant from the summer solstice and the fall equinox. This morning, we will wonder together about our understandings of the substance, purpose and look of faith even as we also identify the something more in which we place our faith. I invite you to co-create this morning message with me. If you are here in person, please have a pen ready. In a few minutes, you will utilize the half sheet of paper that was inserted in your bulletin. And if you are with us from a distance, please gather a pen and a piece of paper or a personal journal.

Let us pray. God of our ancestors, God within each of us and connecting us as community; soften our spirits and open our minds this morning. Lead toward hearing and responding to your call in each of our unique lives. Be with us as we wonder where we are placing our faith. As your holy, loving Spirit embraces us in this time and this space, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

At the age of thirteen, I had a spiritually painful experience with Hebrews chapter eleven. I was partway through eighth grade, the last of my nine years attending a Lutheran grade school. I was within weeks of joining with five peers in the rite of Confirmation. And I had arrived to a crossroads in the shape of a crisis of faith. Across seventh and eighth grade, Catechism class was woven into the school day, several times per week. Catechism, similar to a sequence of pre-confirmation sessions in other Christian traditions, provides a space in which candidates for Confirmation experience in-depth learning about the beliefs and practices of their church.

In that winter and spring of 1996, I became increasingly troubled by the reality that I did not agree with some of the beliefs espoused by my church. I was not yet acquainted with the following two words, but I was at odds with both some of that church body's theology (that is, words and ideas about God) and some of their anthropology (that is, words and ideas about humans). The doctrines of my childhood church did not jive with the ways I experienced God (that is, Love) within the Earth community. Words matter in that they have great power to shape and respond to the realities we live.

When sharing with my pastor that I did not think I was ready to be confirmed, I drew on the words of Hebrews chapter eleven, verse one. Hear how it is phrased in the *New International Version* biblical translation of my youth: "*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*" For as long as I can remember, I have been a passionate seeker of clarity. I appreciate that my parents were drawn to give me a name that means bright, clear. I will always remember that day in which I sat in my pastor's office, with one of my parents alongside me, delivering my truth, which I articulated in this way: I'm not sure yet what I believe, but I know that I do not feel sure or certain that I believe what our church teaches.

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." The NIV Bible offers an understanding of faith as a state of being and, more specifically, an intellectual state of "being sure... and certain." In 1789, Benjamin Franklin (in his mid-80s at that time) wrote to French scientist Jean-Baptiste Le Roy, "*Our new Constitution is now established, everything seems to promise it will be durable; but, in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.*" Franklin pointed to two phenomenon – death and taxes – that appeared to be certain or sure realities within his human existence. For me at the age of thirteen, something in the phrasing "faith is being sure... and certain" chilled my soul and felt like a spiritual and intellectual death sentence I could not accept.

And I was further daunted by the subsequent litany in Hebrews chapter eleven, articulating how a number of biblical ancestors all lived by faith (that state of being sure and certain) and that the sureness and certainty they clung to admitted them to eternal life (that is, a space in heaven after death).

The artwork we chose for the cover of this morning's worship bulletin depicts a highway cutting across a rural landscape toward a mountainous horizon at dawn. One could be motivated to focus in on reaching the other side of the mountains, sure and certain that receiving the risen sun's ray of light and warmth as directly as possible is all that matters. Placing ultimate value on arrival to the imagined ultimate horizon of the afterlife is one valid approach to the faith experience. **As an individual person of faith, as a servant leader within this congregation, and as a citizen of the Earth Community, do you find a focus on arrival to the sun's anticipated brightness and warmth on the other side of the mountains motivating as you move through the struggles and joys of daily life? Do you find a focus on arrival to a better future comforting at times?** I find it more comforting than motivating. We all experience faith differently, which is part of the beauty of human diversity.

Shifting to the present, I thank God for scholars who continue to offer fresh translations of the Bible, reaching back with integrity to engage in rigorous study and interpretation of the original Hebrew and Greek languages of the texts. I particularly favor *The Inclusive Bible* because of how it was born out of an ecumenical process among biblical scholars of various traditions. This morning, we heard Carol read the first verse of Hebrews chapter eleven in this way, "*Faith is the reality of all that is hoped for; faith is the proof of all that is unseen.*"

We see our ancestors in faith in a new way when we understand their faith as action. They placed their faith in God (they demonstrated the reality of, they showed proof of the Love of God. Abel gave to God the best of his handiwork as an offering. Noah courageously followed God's strange call in the face of ridicule by his neighbors.

Sarah and Abraham (exhausted!) moved to a new community and nurtured young people even after they thought they were settled and done with new adventures. Abel, Noah, Sarah and Abraham practiced faith by manifesting the something more for which they hoped. **I wonder, how do you manifest your hope? How do you practice faith by demonstrating the reality or showing the proof of something more for which you hope?**

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment if you're comfortable doing so. Please welcome the first century C.E. follower of Jesus to speak directly to your heart and to your life:

“All of them died in faith. They didn't obtain what had been promised, but saw and welcomed it from afar. By acknowledging themselves to be strangers and exiles on the Earth, they showed that they were looking for a country of their own... But they were searching for a better country, a heavenly one. So God isn't ashamed of them, or ashamed to be called their God. That's why God has prepared a city for them.”

Friends in faith, fellow disciples of Christ, *“They showed that they were looking for a country of their own.”* **Are you showing that you are looking for a country, a human community that follows the law of Love?**

Now is the moment to have your pen in hand. And if you are at a distance from us over the live stream or watching the recording later, please write down this prompt (which we have on the paper in our bulletin). The prompt is this:

The 'something more' (something closer to manifesting the Love of God) into which I want to place my faith (demonstrate reality of, show proof of) is this:

And those who are at a distance, now also please note these three bullet points because we will respond to them:

In my personal life:

As a member of People's Congregational Church:

As a citizen of the Earth community:

So we will respond to the prompt - in my personal life, as a member of People's Congregational Church, and as a citizen of the Earth community. And these intentions can become the substance of our prayer life. Let us share in an extended moment of silence to wonder and note down our insights.

[extended silence - 2 minutes 15 seconds]

You may wish to continue in your reflections during our offertory later and further beyond. The 'something more' (something closer to manifesting the Love of God) into which I want to place my faith (demonstrate reality of, show proof of) is this... It is a gift we need to give ourselves in the midst of our neighbors bustling by in our city in their cars to find moments of quiet reflection and introspection.

Our ancestor in faith wrote, *"Faith is the reality of all that is hoped for; faith is the proof of all that is unseen."*

Let us not only BE people who have faith. Let's DO faith (manifest our hope), because Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Hebrews 11: 1-16