

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 15, 2010
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. 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...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. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age--and Sarah herself was barren--was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. 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. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (NIV)

What is faith? How would you define it? What might you use to describe it? What does faith look like? Martin Luther described faith as being like glue saying it glues the heart to God's promises. James writes about how faith always works and how faith without works is dead. One of the more cynical definitions I've ever read comes from Ambrose Bierce who said: "*Faith—belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge of things without parallel.*"

But of all the definitions and descriptions regarding faith the words from Hebrews chapter 11 probably give us the most familiar one: "*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*" Faith is trust - a solid confidence. Faith is being sure - even in a hope that might be well off in the future. That is what we are told the ancients, the heroes of faith in this chapter, "*were commended for.*" Faith is certain - even of things we can not see with our eyes. For example "*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.*" None of us saw creation with our own eyes, in fact there were no witnesses when God first created the world, and yet we are certain it was formed by God simply speaking the word. While facts and evidence and things like the Creation Museum are helpful for learning more finally we know this by faith. Again faith is being sure and certain. Today, as we look at a portion of this great faith chapter in Hebrews, I want us to consider this question: **Why is faith always a sure thing?**

Faith is being sure and certain - even of some remarkable, almost impossible things. In this chapter we have example after example of people who believed in what they did not yet have and trusted in things they could not see. What is it that makes faith

such a sure thing? Is it some inner strength and confidence of these heroes of faith listed before us? At first glance we might look at these names and want to put these heroes on a pedestal and give them all the credit for such a faith. After all, read some of these names - Noah, Moses and then of course the example for us all - Abraham. As we look at these names we might wonder how we could ever possibly measure up to the standard of trust and confidence these heroes had. We might start to think it takes a really special, super-human person to have this thing called faith.

But look at these names and review once again their lives as recorded for us in the Bible. These were all mere humans just like you and me. In fact, they were sinners just like you and me. There were times they doubted, just as we do. There were times they had their hearts focused on earthly treasures and had their priorities all mixed up, just like at times we do. There were times they were careless and sinful, just like we are. Remember Noah having too much wine? There were times they made excuses, just like we do. Remember Moses at the burning bush? There were times they worried and fretted, just like we do. There were times that, instead of trusting God, they did things their way, just like we do. Remember how even Abraham pretended his beautiful wife Sarah was his sister to avoid trouble. What makes faith a sure thing is not some greatness or inner strength or quality of these Old Testament people. Neither is it our faith that makes us great. These believers did not deserve to be placed on any kind of pedestal. In fact, what they and we deserve because of our sins is hell.

So what makes faith a sure thing? Where did they get such trust in God and confidence that heaven is their home? Is it because the people listed in this chapter were blessed with an easy life? Did God give them the best this world has to offer and shower them only with things that gave them joy and gladness? Again look over this list and we see that is definitely not what makes faith a sure thing. These were people who were fed to lions and thrown into fiery furnaces. They were people who suffered pain and sorrow, just like we do. They were people who dealt with hardship and loneliness, heartache and headache, just like we do. These heroes of faith are people who faced persecution, uncertainty, sickness, and death, just like we do. So such faith doesn't come from having an easy life in a rose colored world.

So how do people ever get to the point of being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see? Why does anyone have this confident trust called faith? How could a person told to leave all his family and friends and go to a foreign land, a place he doesn't even know how to get to, simply obey and go with no questions asked? How could a person trust that they would have a child even though he and his wife were almost 100 year old and well passed the age of child bearing? Why would people live lives on earth as if they were a strangers and aliens here and keep their focus an eternal home they have never seen? Why faith? Why is faith always a sure thing?

The reason, dear friends, can be given with just one word - God. The reason Abraham lived by faith is because He had an awesome God - a God who gave Him some remarkable promises. The reason we live by faith is because we have that same awesome God - a God of grace and mercy. Faith is only as strong as the object in which it trusts and our faith is in a God for whom nothing is impossible. We have a God who gives us His promises and as Abraham learned well we too can consider our God who made the promise faithful. Not a single promise God made to Abraham ever failed him. He had a

child. He was made into a great nation. His descendants were given the very land God promised.

And then there was the promise of all promises - the one Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all these believers looked forward to with eyes of faith. They were promised a Savior. They were promised a Messiah to save them from sin and hell. This Savior would be one through whom all nations would be blessed. He would give them eternal life. This promise meant that heaven was their home. While that Savior did not yet arrive in their day they believed. We read: ***“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.”***

Fellow believers, once again we have seen that our God is a faithful God. He delivered on His most important promise, didn't He? Jesus came to be such a Savior. None of these people had a faith and trust that was in vain. Our Savior delivered - with His perfect life - with His sacrificial death on the cross - with His earth-shattering resurrection from the dead. Jesus made sure that heaven is the eternal home for all who believe. Are we starting to see why faith is always a sure thing? Faith is always a sure thing because God's promises are always sure. We can always be certain that we will have what God promises to give. Faith simply says amen to God's promises. Even our very faith is a gift from His hand.

So we are sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. We still struggle with difficulties and uncertainty, but we know for certain that we have a God who is with us and will work things for our good. We still suffer pain and sorrow and persecution, but we do so confidently holding onto God's promises and keeping our eyes fixed on what is eternal. The devil still throws our sin and guilt in our face, so we cling more tightly to God's sure promises of forgiveness and peace in Jesus. We still face death, but we do so knowing we are looking forward to a better country - a heavenly one. We live by faith and faith is always a sure thing.

Admiral Nelson of the British navy was said to have been a master and wizard of naval tactics. Everyone said it was a treat to learn from and sail with such an expert at sea. Once a man by the name of Sir Robert Stopford was sailing with him off the West Indies and wrote to a love one, *“We are half-starved and have been inconvenienced and endangered by the seas again and again, and we are still so long out of port, but our reward is that we are with Nelson.”*

How much more can we show such a faith in our God! We too could be half-starved, we may be hurting and tossed here and there, but our reward is that we have Jesus. We have a Savior who is with us and loves us so much He spilled out His own blood to save us. If our God did that, how can we not be certain He will keep every promise to us! Our faithful God is why faith is always a sure thing. Live by faith dear friends. Live looking forward to living in heaven ***“the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”*** Read all of Hebrews chapter 11 and we get a better idea of what is and looks like. My prayer is that this be said of each of us: ***“Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”*** Amen.