

**SECOND SCRIPTURE READING: Hebrews 11:1, 8-16**

11 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. 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 himself 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, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But 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.

*This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

**FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: Genesis 15:1-6**

15 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2 But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” 4 But the word of the Lord came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” 5 He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6 And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

*This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD.*

## “By Faith”

The late Henri Nouwen wrote of an experience he had at a circus one time which helps us begin our consideration of this famous text from the 11 chapter of Hebrews. *Nouwen, it seems, went to see the German trapeze group called, “The Flying Rodleighs”. He was mesmerized by their breath-taking performance as they flew gracefully through the air. At the end of the show, he spoke with the leader of the troupe, Rodleigh, himself. Nouwen asked him how he was able to perform with such grace and ease so high in the air. Rodleigh responded, “The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. The secret is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and trust him to catch me. The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I’m not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me.”*<sup>1</sup> Yes, the passage today, from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews is all about trusting God to catch us. It’s about stretching out our arms and trusting God to catch us. It is about Faith.

The letter known as Hebrews, you see, was written to a group of new disciples who’d been suffering a great amount of tribulation, persecution for following this man, Jesus—they were being beaten, tortured, and thrown in prison; their property was being confiscated and their families were being torn away from them.<sup>2</sup> They were, consequently, contemplating giving up on it all. Hebrews was written, by an unknown author, with the purpose of encouraging them to hold fast, to not give up on the hope they knew in Christ’s promises, to remain faith-ful.

The reading begins with a definition of Faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*”. This definition of Faith affirms it as not merely a system of beliefs, but it has to do with whom and what we place our deepest hope and trust in, God and God’s promises! And it comes out of an awareness of how God never breaking promises made, and always providing us support to move forward with hope and conviction.<sup>3</sup> The author provided some examples for the Hebrew audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri J. Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*, (NY: The Crossroad Pub Co; 1999), 195-6).

<sup>2</sup> <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-31-enduring-faith-hebrews-1032-39>. (accessed 8-5-22).

<sup>3</sup> Anon. <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/item/93063580..> (accessed 8-5-2022).

He spoke of the faithful ancestors who placed their trust in God. And he focused especially on Abraham and Sarah. To Abraham and Sarah, God made some extraordinary promises, calling them to be and do more than they could have ever imagined. And Abraham and Sarah demonstrated their faith by trusting and obeying God. They left their families and homes as God called them to, and sought new land, sight unseen. They lived as itinerants, as strangers in the land, trusting always that God would eventually provide a more heavenly habitation. This trust resulted in Abraham and Sarah's unlikely parenthood despite their very advanced ages, parenthood which gave rise to the promised lineage from them, a great number of descendants... *"as many as the grains of sand on the seashore and the stars in the skies"*. After having their son, Isaac, Abraham & Sarah died, but they did so still trusting that the promise of many descendants would be realized...the promise which includes us! It includes us because, we, through our baptism in Jesus, are counted as children of the promise. Jesus, you know, came from one of the tribes of Jacob, Jacob a son of Isaac.

*(pause)*. Now, we need to step aside a bit in our discussion about Faith and admit something...sometimes Faith is hard. It's easy to believe in God's promises, when things are going well. When things are going well, we can let our faith shine as bright as a star in heaven, and we can encourage those around us.<sup>4</sup> But many times, Faith is not easy. Certainly, when the weight of being an alien in a foreign land, when dangers and threats presented themselves on Abraham & Sarah's uncharted course, they found faith hard. Certainly, in the time between when they were promised an heir and when they actually conceived Isaac, 14 years later, when they were approaching 100 years old, they found faith hard.

That's with us too. But, brothers and sisters, I'm here to tell you that if we keep our eyes open, if we look around, we will find the support that God gives us to stay the course, the support which will keep us faithfully going forward. I imagine that many times when, just as he was about to give up on God, Abraham would look at Sarah, his partner in their life's journey with God, and then they'd go outside their tent at night and try to count the stars in the night sky. And, with, as

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<sup>4</sup> David Lose. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/David-Lose-Call-of-Abraham.pdf>. (accessed 8-5-2022).

David Lose says, *“this tangible reminder flung wide across the sky”*, they’d find a measure of both comfort and courage and discover that they could believe once again.<sup>5</sup>

When our faith is hard and we feel like throwing in the towel, we need feel free too to go outside and look up at the stars and remember God’s promise to Abraham and all God’s people throughout the millennia. Or, we can, *“come here to church, and see some of those stars of the heavens now scattered throughout this congregation”*. God has given us to each other, to bolster each other as the writer of Hebrews was encouraging the weary suffering believers, to hold fast and continue on, to not sink into despair asking, “Why me?”, but instead to ask “What now?”<sup>6</sup>

*Rev. Anna Carter Florence tells of a week several years ago that she spent at a Presbyterian youth conference in Colorado.<sup>7</sup> “It was an amazing week,” she says, in the presence of 1200 youth “worshiping full throttle at top decibel, worshiping every night outside, under the stars, (it was required), with a galaxy of sacred space above them”. Just being in the presence of so many other believers in that environment of the Creator’s mastery opens a person up to thinking differently, she said. “It has an effect on you.” At the conference, the musician, David Bailey, played for one of the worship services. He was a singer-songwriter who spent 14 years in a fierce battle with cancer and wrote about it: what it was like to be a 20-something person of faith, married with 2 children, and quite possibly dying. David told the conference attendees that when he was first diagnosed, he used to wake up in the mornings thinking, “Why me?” “Why me?” But then one day he woke up and said, “OK, God, what now?” And it changed his life. And, guess what? It changed theirs too. It changed all the 1200 listening that night. Anna says that “we woke up every morning for the rest of that conference, and the first thing we said to God and one another was, ‘Ok, what now?’”*

Yes, when Faith is hard for us, when

- that frightening diagnosis looms,
- when our son or daughter is making decisions that are heading them down the wrong path,
- when the bills are simply suffocating,

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<sup>5</sup> David Lose.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Carter Florence. *“Tent Dreams”*. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/> (accessed 8-5-22).

<sup>7</sup> Anna Carter Florence.

- when the days of chasing the toddler around or carpooling the middle schoolers are crushing your spirit,
- when the boss just seems to have it out for you,
- when you just don't think you can stand the stares, the whispers or eyes that don't meet yours any longer,
- when your marriage is on the rocks,
- when you have lied, cheated, and treated others so badly so that you can't look in the mirror any longer,

whenever any of these are true: you need remember that God has given us one another to encourage and bolster each other on. God has given us each other precisely so that we can shine our Faith into each other's hearts and remind one another that God always keeps God's promises...to give peace in the midst of the storm, to take what is evil and transform it into something good, to empower us in the midst of trouble and to catch us when we fall.<sup>8</sup> For brothers and sisters, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has made us one with him...and even death will never separate us now. There is no place that you or I can ever be that is outside of God's saving and redeeming love. That's a promise that God has made since the beginning of time. We can believe it. We can reach out our arms and trust.

The trustworthiness of God that we know from our past and present experience is the ground of Faith. Faith assures us we can go into the future with hope and conviction.<sup>9</sup> And it urges us to go with a confidence that we do not go alone, especially when things get hard. So let us set our sights on the heavenly habitation and reach out for the substance of things hoped for. Let us look up and also look around and gather strength from the evidence of things not seen. Let us go forward, following Jesus wherever he leads us, by Faith. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Reeb. "When Trouble Comes". [https://day1.org/233kly-broadcast/5d9b820e71918cdf2002a85/when\\_trouble\\_comes](https://day1.org/233kly-broadcast/5d9b820e71918cdf2002a85/when_trouble_comes). (accessed 8-5-2022)

<sup>9</sup> Anon. <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/item/93063580..> (accessed 8-5-2022).