

**Fear and Faith.**

Luke 12:32-40; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16  
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor John Schwehn  
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“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

In the last conversation I had with my grandfather before he died, he asked me about this verse from Hebrews 11. My grandfather – who we affectionately knew as ‘Popo’ – was a navy man and studied engineering at MIT. He worked for years in our nation’s nuclear submarine program and later went on to be a consultant, working on complicated cases involving nuclear power plants.

Needless to say, Popo was detail-oriented, careful, and stubborn in his dedication to reason and the facts. He was active in his Presbyterian church, and, when it came to his own devotional life, he studied up on the historical critical method of biblical interpretation. He wanted to know everything about when the Bible was written, the historical context it was addressing, and the factual likelihood of its many stories.

So I found it strange, and a little surprising, that in my last conversation with him before he died Popo wanted to talk about that verse from Hebrews 11 that we read today: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

At first, I figured maybe liked this verse because it provided a clear and concise definition for that fuzzy word that we seem to use all the time. Faith. But as we talked, while his health was beginning to fail, he was clearly transfixed by what it claimed. Faith grasps towards things we can never know with certainty. It is not built upon a set of verifiable hypotheses, nor does it adhere to a scientific method. No. “Faith is the assurance of things *hoped* for, the conviction of things *not seen*.” It defies rational explanation, and yet it is the truest thing we know.

I have wondered ever since if my grandfather found comfort in this verse precisely because he knew he was journeying towards his own death - something that, without faith, can be deeply frightening. He had buried his wife of 63 years, my dear and beloved Momo, only three years before; perhaps the thought of being reunited with her gave him a hope that defied his tidy system of fact-based knowing. He embarked upon his journey from life into death in faith; a journey from what is seen to what is unseen and unknowable. I hope he felt comforted by this faith before he died. I hope he did not feel afraid.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

The writer of Hebrews goes on to lift up the story Abraham as an example of faith. He recalls how Abraham traveled in faith away from his homeland and towards an unknown, foreign land. Very old and still without any descendants, all that Abraham and Sarah had were the promises of God. All they had was faith. But off they went, boldly into a future that they could not know, towards a land that was not their own.

In the most literal sense of the word, they were immigrants. Abraham and Sarah were immigrants. And, for the writer of Hebrews, the immigrant's journey is the picture of faith. Faith is like heading off for an unknown place with a deep hope, a profound conviction, that God alone will bring us through.

One does not need to follow the news of our world for very long before finding story after story of immigrants and refugees. Millions in our world set out on this journey every day, as they flee war, political violence, and economic devastation. Like Abraham and Sarah, many of these immigrants are motivated by the hope of a future that they may never get to see. At huge personal risk, these faithful people travel because they still have hope, because they refuse to believe that God has not also promised them an abundant and blessed life.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

My friends, we are travelers, too. The story of Sarah and Abraham is not only about immigration – it is a story about us, about all of life. Even if you have lived in the same home or hometown your entire life, I would still wager that you've experienced your fair share of journeys. Whether we want to admit it or not, life itself is nothing but journey, nothing but change and flux!

As we grow, we experience changes with our bodies. We face new questions and challenges in every chapter of life: the enormous struggle of navigating middle school and high school wondering every day, "who *am I?*" and "What am I supposed to do in life?" Relationships come and go, hearts are broken. We struggle to figure out what our family might look like, what our career path might be. And then these same jobs and families are thrown into upheaval by sickness or lay-offs or retirement. We journey through seasons of addiction and depression and joy and fulfillment and grief. Eventually, like Popo and all the saints of God before him, we all embark on that final journey into death.

With all of the change happening in our lives, our bodies, and our world, it is little wonder that we often feel so *fearful*. If we lived according to only the facts – if God did not give us faith – all we would ever do is feel afraid! Mass shootings, acts of terror, the killings of black men by law enforcement, the ambush and murder of police officers, economic hardship, nations at war, nasty political rhetoric...and the list goes on and on.

We are all travelers as Abraham and Sarah were. But most days we would much rather stay locked within our own homes rather than venture out into a world that we cannot predict. And fear, my friends, it is a *real emotion*. It hurts. But when fear compels us to treat others with suspicion and hate, it becomes a horrible sin. Fear that motivates bigotry or isolationism or hatred is sin, plain and simple.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian and political dissident during the Nazi regime, had this to say about fear. In 1933, shortly before Hitler officially came to power, Bonhoeffer preached,

“The Bible, the gospel, Christ, the church, the faith—all are one great battle cry against fear in the lives of human beings. Fear...crouches in people's hearts. It hollows out their insides, until their resistance and strength are spent and they suddenly break down. Fear secretly gnaws and eats away at all the ties that bind a person to God and to others, and when in a time of need that person reaches for those ties and clings to them, they break and the individual sinks back into himself or herself, helpless and despairing, while hell rejoices.”

Pretty strong, and powerful, language! But fear does have this corrosive effect on us, and on the community to which we belong. It corrodes away at us until all we feel is alone. We stop trusting each other. We assume the worst of neighbors, of strangers, of fellow immigrants.

And yet...God in Jesus Christ comes into this same hurting, fearful, painful world and says, “Do not be afraid, little flock! For it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!”

Do not be afraid! Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also!

So...where is your treasure? Is it stored up in the places and things that you want to control, but can't? Is your heart's treasure stored in your 401k, your bank account, or in anxiety for your own success? Is it stored in a desire for certainty and a life free from change and the unknown? If our hearts are in these places, of course we will always be afraid! But remember,

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

The opposite of fear, the opposite of sin itself, is not courage or virtue or even “doing the right thing.” It is faith! It is faith in a God who promises to be with us always! It is faith in a God who goes on loving us fiercely, a God who calls us like God called Sarah and Abraham to venture out in hope! It is faith in a God who goes with us even into death itself, a God in Christ by whose own death and resurrection we are set free from fear!

There is one thing, my friends, that I can see that gives me deep faith, hope, and conviction. It is all of you. It is this gathered assembly – a people worshipping God together, a people that together confesses Christ crucified and risen! We, here, are the body of Christ. And we must not be afraid!

Together, we are those watchful servants who wait together for Christ to come knocking at the door. We are the ones that Jesus reaches out to meet and to serve. And today – *now!* – Christ is truly here, meeting us in this place. So “Do not be afraid, little flock!” Have faith. Hope in the resurrection.