

Sermon title: “A Sojourner’s Faith in the City of God” (The Meaning of Faith)

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Sunday, August 11, 2019, at 10:00a.m.

Sermon text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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Theme: Faith is confidence that Jesus Christ leads us forward through the darkest days and the deepest wilderness to a better country, as the ethical Christian people God call us to be.

This morning marks the beginning of a four-part sermon series on Faith. Today, and for the next three Sundays, the lectionary Scripture passages are from the Letter to the Hebrews. Some biblical scholars describe the Letter to the Hebrews as a sermon manuscript in its own right, addressed to an early Christian community in the year 63 CE.

The author is unknown but may well have been the early church leader Priscilla, later mentioned by Luke in the Book of Acts. Priscilla, the diminutive form of her more formal name Prisca, referenced in other epistles as well, was described by the Apostle Paul as an “eloquent” ministry leader with “a thorough knowledge of the scriptures.” She led and taught an early church, together with her husband Aquila. In Acts 18, Paul describes the husband-wife team as his “helpers in Christ.”

This letter, then, which we will offer us inspiration over the next few weeks, is neither written by Hebrews or written in Hebrew. Rather, it was written in Greek addressed to a group of Hebrews who were learning about Jesus and accepting him as the Christ, putting their faith in him for the first time. It is part of the New Testament. And if Priscilla did write this letter to the Hebrews, teaching them about what it means to put your faith in Jesus Christ, it would make this book the only one in the Bible authored by a woman. Thus, it is unique, and welcome, for all who seek further biblical evidence of women’s legitimate role as ministry leaders in the church, then and now.

The audience for this letter, these Hebrew Christians, were probably also subject to persecution for believing in the Risen Christ. They would have been disheartened and discouraged by the hardship of life as Christians. Like so many early Christ-followers, they would have been waiting for the promised, “any-day-now” return of Jesus, yet he still had not come. These early Christians, so new to the faith, may have begun to doubt whether Jesus could really be the Messiah at all.

We will hear passages from the letter written to these doubting Christians as an exhortation to keep the faith. It argues for patience. It encourages the community to rekindle its faith in Jesus Christ and to understand him in broader terms, including his serving as a model for facing the difficult challenge of living out a principled life of loving kindness and mercy in a hostile world. It is a letter that reminds them, as it does us, that we are mere sojourners on this earth, aliens in a foreign land. Our one hope, and best hope, in finding our way home to our Creator God, is to follow the teachings of Jesus, living our lives as his disciples with integrity and honesty, adhering to a Christian ethic of loving God and loving neighbor, always.

Have faith, Priscilla teaches. Let’s listen to what that means.

I'll be reading from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 11:1-3 and 8-16. Hear Now the Word of the Lord.

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 him 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.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds to your Word this morning, that we might learn to trust in you like the faithful ones who walked the Christian journey ahead of us. Let us always listen for your call and be found in faithfully following. Amen.

“When you have lost your way in the wilderness, find your faith, and keep on moving.”¹

¹ Advice, with my own additions, from a sermon by Rev. Dr. M. Craig Barnes, Shadyside Presbyterian Church, “The Wilderness Guide,” 3/10/10 approx.

Do you know of anyone who has found his or her faith recently? Or came back to it after a long wander elsewhere? We usually find it when we've been knocked to our knees by something awful. On our knees is where we usually discover humility. And from that posture, we might even learn to pray.

We need our faith to survive sometimes. Faith shores us up when we're down, when we are lost, when we feel like we are drowning. Finding our faith is like seizing upon a life-ring, a flotation buoy, faith saves us – preserves, us, and can help us back on our feet for another day.

So when disaster strikes, whether it's an illness, or the death of a loved one, a job loss, or our own children's struggles, or whether it's something out there that touches us deeply – like the news of another angry white man's shooting, more innocent people gunned down, or the nonsensical timing of ICE raids to arrest and remove long-term resident, undocumented aliens, to coincide with their U.S. citizen children's first day of school, or the slow but steady erosion of our society's values and better behaviors into an amalgam of stunted, misguided, and downright dishonest ways of being that we cannot condone, then, we might want to look to Jesus and give faith another try. Because sometimes, Jesus is all we can count on, when everything else is falling apart.

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“When you have lost your way in the wilderness, find your faith, and keep on moving.”

That is what the letter to the Hebrews is all about. Survival from doubt, from outcast fatigue, and from persecution by the renewal of faith. More than mere survival, but joyful flourishing, in the life of Christ.

What the writer of Hebrews offers us this morning, is a word of hope. And as Luke's Paul wrote, she does have “a thorough knowledge of the scriptures” for she reminds us of the generations-long faithfulness of God, of God's covenant with Abraham and all of us, that God will always be present as our God, to love us forever and ever-lastingly, and we will always be God's people.

She harkens back to the descendants of Abraham, and their journeying as sojourners in a foreign land. Wherever they would travel, they would always be seeking that connection with God, to renew the sense of communion with the Holy. As in the Book of Genesis, the letter to the Hebrews speaks of traveling as sojourners in this foreign place, the earthly city, when what they seek, when what we all seek, as Christians, is a city built with strong foundations, God's foundations, that “better country” where the cornerstone is Christ.

Sometimes it is not clear where we are headed. But one thing is for sure: the place we wander through, the wilderness we're lost in, the dark place of doubt, is not a place in which to settle down. You don't want to stay in the wilderness forever. So, try not to linger. Being lost is a temporary state of affairs: the things that happen to us that leave us wondering we will ever see normal again: the pain that won't go away, the family strife that won't resolve, the death of someone whom we loved and depended upon. These challenges often bring on the feeling of being lost in the wilderness, even when we think we have a good handle on life.

Other times our disorientation is expected, when we try something new and challenging, but find ourselves quickly in over our heads. Maybe our wilderness comes with being a new parent, or a newly-wed. For some, it's starting a new school or college in a new place, a strange town, - maybe the language is not your own - maybe you don't know a soul. Or maybe you've started a new job and it's all too overwhelming and too much to manage with the kids in school and now your parents are ill and they live in another state, and they need you. And you just can't

be everywhere. And you begin to ask yourself – where should I be? Where do I belong? Who is my neighbor and to whom should I pour out my love?

It's the Wilderness, all over again. We're looking for the City of God, but we are mere sojourners among the earthly cities, seeking Peace.

We've all been there. And most of us have come out the other side. We've emerged to find a more stable place, a better feeling, a stronger friendship, a new calling, a different job, a healthier outlook, a comfort level in new situations that we never had before, a *confidence* that everything will be all right: the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen, because life already got better, because God keeps God's promises. And we know that. We trust in that. We have to, and we do.

Or maybe you're not so sure.

What then, is faith, and how do you find it? Because it sure would help to have something to believe in about now. It sure would help.

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"When you have lost your way in the wilderness, find your faith, and keep on moving."

That seems like good advice. Never settle down in the dark places of life. Keep on moving. But how do we do it? How do we find our faith, and get out of our rut, when everything we've known and loved and counted upon seems to be crashing down around us – where's faith? Where's Jesus? Where's God when everything is going from bad to worse?

The letter to the Hebrews can help. There are some reliable answers there. It tells us to start with the basics, to understand what we are talking about. What is Faith? Hebrews 11:1 tells us: *"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen."*

So then, let's recast our wilderness advice this way: "When you've lost your way in the wilderness, find your assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things unseen, and keep on moving." It's a bit clumsy, but maybe a little more concrete. As I read more from the letter to the Hebrews, I began to understand why faith, "the assurance of things hoped for", was so central to our moving out of the wilderness, those lost places of our lives. And I recognized how we, as Christians, have something that Abraham and Sarah of the Old Testament did not: the gift of Jesus to guide us on our way.

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Faith is not about magic, or superstition, or just plain wishful thinking. But faith does require some believing. Believing in God's plan for each one of us. Believing in a God that keeps God's promises and always has. Believing that the promises of justice, peace, and mercy on this earth will be, and have been, realized in the really-did-happen life of Jesus, and the mystery of his resurrection. Believing in Christ's presence among us today through the power of the Holy Spirit. We believe these things as Christians.

But what if you don't? What, then, is faith about, really? What are you missing? What can you pull from that arsenal of human experience to carry you through the wilderness, even if you are still not sure about Jesus?

What is that essential ingredient that gives all of us who *do* put our faith in Jesus as Christ, the assurance and the conviction that the wilderness experience of being "strangers in a strange land" is a *temporary* state of affairs? What is finding faith in Christ? It's having confidence, confidence in Christ. Putting your trust there and holding on tight.

We dig out of the dark places by putting our confidence in the conviction that what we feel, first-hand, with that first glimmer of light piercing through the darkest, most despairing days of our lives; when your wounded heart and ruptured soul and broken body finally stop

bleeding long enough for you to begin to heal; when your inner confusion begins to resolve into direction; when you realize at long last that you really are a purposeful and precious creation of God; what you feel is nothing less than the love of Christ washing you clean, and keeping you afloat, like the great waves crashing over a tiny lifeboat – merciful, cleansing waves that become the calm water that holds us up, invisibly, from underneath.

When you are confident in your belief in Christ’s presence, you can face down anything that comes your way, even whatever it is that scares you most. You can whistle in the dark. You can feel your way ahead. You’ve got faith, and that’s all you need to lift your foot up out of the murky miasma and step into the light, on solid ground, with Christ as your foundation.

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St. Augustine wrote in his classic tome, the City of God, the metaphorical struggle of all humanity as fallen creatures living in earthly cities. But the Christian, is the more self-aware, and is given the gift of Jesus Christ, and the grace of God’s mercy, that ever allows us to move forward, striving for the heavenly City of God. Along the way we are reminded to follow the teachings of Jesus: to show kindness, love mercy, and humbly walk with God. We are called to be the better angels, to strive for that better country, to make a difference in our communities, by living life as disciples of Christ, sharing love and rejecting hate. Offering kindness. Supplanting anger with gratitude. These are the virtues we live by, that help us leave the wilderness times, and find our way back home.

Christian faith is the **assurance** of things hoped for, the **conviction** of things not seen *but already present in our lives*. Christian faith is the **confidence** that God has a purposeful plan for each one of us. Christian faith is the first-hand **experience** that the Holy Spirit is at work within us and among us, here and now. Faith is hope for a better country, yes, **but grounded in confidence, conviction, and assurance, that God is leading us there, one day at a time.**

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Lost in the wilderness? Find your faith: have *confidence* in God’s plan, place your *hope* in Jesus Christ, put your *trust* in the power of the Holy Spirit, and plow ahead with *courage*. You’ll make it through, with Christ to guide you.

Faith is enough. In fact, it’s all you need, to carry on.

Amen.