

By Faith

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8 – 12; Luke 12: 32 – 40

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Both this week and next, I'm going to turn to a part of scripture that we do not often use in church, the book of Hebrews. There are a variety of reasons for our avoidance of this text. For one thing, it is an anonymous part of the New Testament. Though you will sometimes see a bible attribute this letter to Paul, there is really no evidence from early texts that Paul had anything to do with this work, and there is a lot of evidence that he didn't. So, we really do not know anything about the author. Similarly, we do not have any real idea of the audience of the letter. "The letter to the Hebrews" sounds as if it were written to Jewish people far removed from Jerusalem, but it appears that the title was added by a few scribes in the second century. So, knowing neither the audience nor the author, we know very little about the context of these words. Lack of context would probably be enough to keep this work a relatively obscure part of the canon.

But, by far the biggest reason we avoid this text is that it is preachy. It's not really a letter at all. It's a sermon, as it admits towards the end. And if there is anything people don't like, especially in church, it is preachiness. Let that be a warning to me. Despite that, this Sunday and next, we're going to delve into it a bit. And the part we are going to look at today involves stories – stories about what faith is and what it means to us.

So, I'm going to start with a story, myself, one that should be familiar to us. I'm going to remind us of an event that most of us lived through, and all of us know about.

It seems hard to believe, but it was fifty years ago this month that people from all over this great nation converged on Washington, D.C., to march in support of what they called "Jobs and Freedom." It was, in many ways, the historical high point of the civil rights movement. The jobs they wanted were for Black Americans, who had long been denied access to a wide variety of jobs. The freedom they sought was also for Black Americans, whose freedoms were limited in ways we, in the North, can barely comprehend, and certainly would never have tolerated for ourselves.

The culmination of this march was the famous speech by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, in which he told thousands of people and the whole world: "I have a dream. I have a dream that one day people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream, brothers and sisters!"

We are fifty years down the road from that moment, although I bet that many of us remember it pretty well. And in those fifty years, many things have happened, not the least of which is that this event will be commemorated on August 28th by our first Black president, in a speech on those very same steps. I doubt that President Obama has any special memories of the event, since he was only two years old at the time Dr. King spoke there. But I am sure he knows the story very, very well. As do we.

Our country has gone through a great deal since that speech. A lot that seemed so simple in 1963 has proven to be more complex, more subtle, and more difficult than mere laws can change. But Dr. King's dream still lives, and there is still excitement and hope about our future as a people together. What I want us to consider today, in the light of the story of that speech, is the power of that hope, and the faith we share that inspires that hope. I want us to consider how we experience and explain the power and meaning of our faith by the way we share our faith stories.

"...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, for by it the people of old received divine approval..." says our text from Hebrews today. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had

real faithí he, indeed, had a dream. For Dr. King, and for us, to have faith is to have a dream about ourselves and our world. Christian faith is to have our dreams match with God's dream as we know it in Jesus Christ, and we do that by comparison with the stories we read in the bible.

Telling stories. Remembering Dr. King's speech in this way and at this time is a bit like what the author of the letter to the Hebrews doesí also a lot like what Jesus does, and even a lot like what the prophets in the Old Testament do, in response to questions about faith. What they do is to tell stories. So, if you're a prophet, or a rabbi, or a leader -- or maybe a Deacon or a teacher -- and someone approaches and says, "Well, what is faith, and what good is it going to do me?"

Today we want to know what faith is, not which faith to choose. Time was when it was about which faith to choose.

And the answer from the leader is, almost invariably, "Well, kid, let me tell you a story about that." The stories are often about the relationship that God has with the people, and that God has had with specific people, like Abraham, and Sarah. They tell the stories, and then they sum it up and say, "that all happened by faith."

Think of a child approaching a parent: "Hey mom. What is faith?" And so the writer of Hebrews tries a direct explanation, one which still sounds pretty good to me today: "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That is a good, solid, answer, but it apparently wasn't enough for whoever asked the question. If you think of your parenting days, or perhaps your grandparenting days, you know that just one answer is rarely enough. So, on to the stories.

Our leader goes way, way back, all the way to Abraham, who obeyed by faith, and journeyed by faith. And then Sarah, who conceived by faith. And, basically, the author's answer is that all of what we are today is because these people lived by faith, and that's what faith is.

Or, to use our more modern example that is now fifty years past, all that stuff that happened in Washington, D.C., in that hot summer of 1963 happened because Dr. King and his followers had faith. They had faith that God is involved in movements of justice and righteousness. They had faith that God will ultimately triumph. They had faith, too, in the dream that our great nation was founded on, that all people were created equal. The movement started and thrived on faith, great faith.

The answer to the second question about what difference faith makes is implicit in the stories. Is it important to have faith? Well, let me tell you a story about Dr. King. Or let me tell you a story about Moses, who had faith and freed his people, even though he didn't really want to. Is faith important? It was to them. It was to our world.

Did you know, by the way, that Martin Luther King, just like Moses, didn't set out to be, and really didn't want to be, a civil rights leader? Moses wanted to tend sheep and stay out of the limelight from which he had escaped. Martin King wanted to tend books, and avoid the limelight by being a quiet scholar in a seminary somewhere. The times demanded something different, but it was the faith of Moses and the faith of Martin Luther King that caused them to take a risky, strange, and dangerous path.

So, ask the question: "does faith matter?" History knows the answer. The stories we share tell the answer. Whole peoples know freedom because of the answer.

The church has ever found it necessary to tell stories about what we mean by faith, and what happens to us by faith, and how we live in faith, because the church knows that it is difficult to speak of things

hoped for, and of things not seen, and yet we have staked our lives on those important things. So, we tell stories.

We tell about specific actions that God has done in our world and our history. We remember the specific people who have acted for the course of justice, of love, of righteousness in the world, and how their faith has moved them. We speak about those big things.

We also speak about some smaller things propelled by our faith. We tell stories about how our efforts to love persons who don't love themselves -- how loving them and sharing the love the God has for each of us can help us love ourselves, and therefore, love each other -- how that is the way our faith works, too.

We speak of dreams that people have held onto in the midst of suffering. Dreams of the right, the good, the just -- dreams of love for God and for each other -- because we know that those dreams are God's promises of faith. So, those dreams are alive in the stories that come to Moses or to Abraham, or to the writer of Hebrews, or even to us.

It is precisely because the content of faith is not a simple content -- not really one that can be reduced to a tract or a formula -- it is precisely this complexity within a simplicity that means we must tell stories of faith -- old ones from the Bible and new ones from our lives and our history.

We know what to hope for through stories, and we know our roots in faith through these same stories. And we know faith in stories even, in fact, probably because to talk about something as important as faith, you have to talk around it and through it by the examples that inspire us to dream and hope and live -- by faith.

Yes, faith matters. Yes, the promises of God are worthy and powerful. Yes, faith helps us confront the mysteries of life, just as it helps us hold our heads up each day we live by it. How do we know? Because of Abraham and Sarah, because of Moses and Aaron. And because of Martin Luther King, and perhaps because of some of the people gathered in this room right now. We know faith matters because we know the stories of the people who lived out their faith, and as we tell and retell those stories of others, they become our stories, too -- the treasures of our communal lives.

So, in a week or two, we will have a lot of retellings of that summer fifty years ago. Most of the memories will be uplifting and happy. Some of them will be cynical, corrective, and judgmental. Some of them will be about the disappointments of dreams not yet fulfilled. But, most of them will remind us that faith really can move mountains, mountains of hatred, privilege, and prejudice. As we listen to those stories in the coming days -- although you may not hear this directly from our news outlets -- remember the faith that drove those people then, because it is still our faith now. We know it is because the stories we hear, and the stories we tell, are our stories of faith, too.

Amen.

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