

## Faith

Hebrews 11:1-3

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

It's good to be with you. I enjoy preaching; I also enjoy *not* preaching. I want to thank Mary Anona, Bobbie Wrenn, Jen, Bill, and L'Anni for their beautiful messages over the last month. We are fortunate to have such gifts in this community.

This community is, maybe, coming back together. After a summer, after 2 ½ years of being scattered by COVID. We are persevering with life together. I love seeing you re-affirm your connections with each other and this church and the life we share. In this season of "return" I want to talk about 3 ideas that unite us all. Today, I will talk about faith. And in two weeks, about hope. And in two more weeks, on the first Sunday of the new church year, about love. Faith, hope, and love are what our life with God is about. We begin with faith. We hear one of the most famous passages on faith from the quirky Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11.

*Now faith is **the assurance (reality) of things hoped for, the conviction (evidence) of things not seen.***

Hebrews says a lot more about faith, but it doesn't get any more straightforward. In fact, this message from Hebrews is echoed by a strikingly similar message from Paul in the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians; he writes, "we walk by faith and not by sight."

Scripture says: faith is how we see things that are otherwise hard to see. In faith, we not only see things, we *know* them—we can rely on what faith shows us.

Your faith, my faith, our faith is a kind of knowing. But it's not the knowing of science or math. Things we know by faith can't be put under a microscope, or filled into an equation. What you know by faith is invisible to the eye, it's visible by your heart. What does it mean to see with your heart? What are these things you see with this deep part of you?

Paul Tillich, was an amazing 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian. He still has the best definition of faith I know. Faith, Tillich says, is "ultimate concern."

You get what Tillich's getting at? Faith is what moves us toward what is essential. What is it that grabs you at the level of your being and draws you out into something bigger than you? You all know what a "concern" is. Life is full of "concerns." We are concerned because we are fragile and tender beings. We are vulnerable to being hurt and our lives are precarious. Threats to us are everywhere. Is there anything to eat? Can I pay the bills? Can I breathe? Can I get help when I'm sick? Those are all concerns. But we human beings are special in that we have concerns that are about more than our physical needs. Am I loved? Is the world fair? Will I ever stop grieving? Where can I find peace? What is true?

When you stop and think about it, our lives are full of concerns. We organize our days to meet them. Tillich wants to say that within you is something that hungers to be connected to the external world, the world around you, more profoundly than using it to satisfy your bodily needs. Something us wants to belong here. We want to feel connected to life itself. To this great chain of being that began long ago. We want to know that we are not an accident of matter, but there is, perhaps a reason for being here, together.

Meaning. We want meaning. This meaning is the invisible thing—the thing that can't be seen by the eyes. But only with the searching, yearning eyes of your heart.

This summer, I encountered a book that said there is an essential role for faith in human life. Martin Hagglund is a philosopher who teaches at Yale and in his book "Secular Faith," Hagglund says that faith is *required* for living in our mortal bodies. Hagglund rejects faith in God, his faith in the essential value and goodness of life. Life is beautiful, Hagglund writes, but because we are mortal, it is faith that moves us to do all we can love ourselves, to love others, to seek political and economic justice for all. Hagglund's secular faith is ultimately concerned with life.

Beth can tell you that there were lots of things about Hagglund's book that made me want to throw it across the room in frustration, but what I appreciated about Hagglund is that he pulls the idea of faith into the middle of the human arena. He says that all of us have some kind of faith, some kind of desire to transcend ourselves. I find most of our conversation about faith within the Christian tradition to be cliched and mind-numbingly circular. They all say, "you need faith to know God," but if you ask how you get faith they say, "only God gives it."

Hagglund and Tillich are closer. Everyone has faith. Faith is part of our humanity. All of us look at our small, short lives and wonder what it means for us to live bravely in the face of our inevitable death. All of us put faith in something or someone that we hope will push away despair, or stave off sadness, or somehow beat back death. The question of faith is not whether you have it, but what is it that you put your faith in?

What is your ultimate concern? Justice? Beauty? Mercy? Joy? Tillich says that we are ultimately concerned about something to which we belong and yet from which we feel existentially separated. Can you look at the objects of your own concern and ask, "is this worthy of my my heart? If I pursue this thing will it satisfy my longing, will it heal what hurts, if I put my life into this will I get my life back and even more?"

There's always risk in faith. The risk that your faith's object will not prove worthy. That your faith will have to be re-assembled from what crumbled. But I do believe that it is better to be bold in faith, to reach for the most marvelous object of faith, even if we are disappointed, than to put our faith in small things, minor concerns, unworthy of our life's vital energy.

We are all people of faith, longing for a reunion with that thing that holds not only the key to unlock the mystery of our own being but of all being.

I have not yet been disappointed by the object of faith in our old, old story.

God, loves world, makes everything in it, just so, so that everything fits, everything has a place, and everything is good. And God loves it all. This same God, seeing what a mess we make of things, takes on a body, and walks alongside us to teach us how to find our way back to a shared experience of created goodness.

And Jesus, Jesus is concerned with us before we're ever concerned with him. He's concerned with filling our hungry stomachs, and healing our physical and mental illnesses, and Jesus is concerned with those of us who are poor and in prison, and Jesus is concerned with those of us who have screwed up so that we know we are forgiven. Jesus is so concerned with us that Jesus goes with us into death, that we might not be afraid.

God is concerned that we know that love always makes a way. That love is stronger than death, that love makes all things new. That love is the action of faith

All of us wonder if our lives are connected to something beautiful, something joyful, something true, something enduring, something so much bigger than us but that also includes us. All of us long for that thing we cannot see with our eyes—meaning—but for which we search with the eyes of our hearts. All of us have faith. Let yours be big and lovely and worthy of your life.

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