

Pentecost 9C 2022
Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16
August 7, 2022

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” These are beautiful words—and some of the most memorable words about faith in the Christian scriptures.

The author of Hebrews is writing to a community of Christians who are worn out and worn down. They have been dealing with rejection and isolation—and even persecution—threats, torture, death—for their faith. It’s hard for them to believe that the Kingdom of God Jesus preached about is even a distant possibility much less coming now. It’s hard to believe that following the way of Jesus—living a life of self-giving love—makes any difference at all.

So, this letter—which is really more like an extended sermon—is written to encourage these discouraged and beaten down Christians. Not just these particular Christians but Christians of every time and place who are struggling with the big gap between the way the world is and the way we want the world to be.

Faith is a big focus in the letter to the Hebrews—and a particularly big focus in this 11th chapter. The word actually occurs 24 times in this chapter—it’s hard to miss.

Faith is one of those words that has a few different meanings that overlap. Sometimes we think about it as belief—Christian faith is about believing certain things about who Jesus is and what he has

done. Most often, in the letters of Paul, when he uses the word faith it is about trust—trusting in the God revealed in Jesus.

But it's a little bit different in Hebrews. Faith, in this letter, is more about *how we live*. How do we live in obedience to God—how do we live lives that follow in the way of Jesus—in a time that seems so full of hate and selfishness—in a time when the world seems to be heading in the other direction?

How do we live as people who believe that the future belongs to God—and that God really is bringing into being a new world?

In this reading from Hebrews, we are reminded of examples of faithful living—some of the pillars of the faith, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And then we hear these words, which I'd like to focus on: *“All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.”* I really love this image of seeing the promises—in the distance—and greeting them.

“Promises, promises!”

That's actually the first thing that comes to my mind when I hear the word. It's a cynical reaction—coming from our human experience of frequently broken promises. *We don't really expect promises to be kept.*

In my own life, I think back to the Girl Scout promise—which is the first one I can remember making. I can still remember it.

“On my honor, I will try to do my duty to God and my country, to help other people at all times and to obey the Girl Scout Laws.” The words have changed a little since my time but the part that makes it realistic is “I will try”—that’s what makes it humanly possible to keep.

As an adult, I think about other promises—like the baptismal promises we affirm at confirmation which include something as audacious as promising to “work for justice and peace in all the earth.” Then there are marriage vows and ordination vows---and lots of promises in between that are made on a daily basis. And that are probably also broken on a daily basis.

We are human and we often have a hard time following through. One of the pieces of advice that has stuck with me is “It’s much better to under promise and overdeliver.” I’ve found that, when I’m able to actually do it, it does invite less criticism and better evaluations. And it does have its place in creating realistic expectations.

But I’m not sure it’s what we want from God.

These promises that God is making are no small thing. These promises are of a new heaven and a new earth—as it says in the book of Revelation—of a restored world. Like Abraham, we need to be able to see *this* future and greet it.

Most of us are afraid to look ahead because the picture of the future coming toward us is so bleak. The area where we look farthest ahead is the climate. Climate change models show a future that is 4 degrees warmer by the next century if we greet the future with a burying our heads in the sand approach and continue on our same course. If we greet the greet the future with determination to drastically change, the rise in temperature will be 1.1 degrees.

Based on what we see in the present, we are afraid for the future of our country—afraid of a recession--afraid for the future of democracy.

One of the time-tested ways for dealing with anxious thoughts is *not* to think ahead, *not* to think about the future—just focus on the here and now, the present. So, *not* thinking about the future helps us cope with these fearful possibilities.

I want to shift for a minute to *how we see*. A few years ago, I went to my eye doctor for a regular exam. Ever since 7th grade, I have been near-sighted which means I have trouble seeing things at a distance. I always hated going to the eye doctor because I somehow felt like I was failing the test when I couldn't read the letters. So, I was completely caught off guard in this visit, when the doctor told me I was less near-sighted than the year before. I asked

how that happened and she said it's, "presbyopia". "You should know what that is—it comes from Greek."

Presby means "elder", so this is "elder vision." I'm sure many of you know what I'm talking about. It's the natural aging process of the eye where it becomes far-sighted--and if you have normal vision, you generally need to use reading glasses or an arm-extender to clearly see things close up. But if you are near-sighted, your eyes kind of get better. The catch is that when your vision is corrected so you can see distance—with contacts or glasses—you then become like people with normal vision who now need reading glasses.

My doctor came up with a great solution for me called monovision. My right eye is corrected for distance and my left eye is what I use for reading. It's apparently a matter of training the brain and there were a couple of weeks in the beginning as my brain was getting trained, when I was fairly dizzy. But now, I've got one eye that sees distance and one eye that sees up close.

I think this is a picture of what it looks like to live by faith. We've got one eye on those promises in the distance and one eye up close on what's happening now. We act now in light of what we see in the distance. And, if what we see in the distance, is a whole and restored earth, a world at peace and where everyone has what they need, *then we greet those promises*. We acknowledge them. We welcome them. We prepare for their arrival.

Over the last week, a couple of very different emails have come in—both in response to the signs we have out front remembering some of those who have died in mass shootings. The first was from someone who is active in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. In part it said: *I was struck by your signs and wondered whether you'd strayed from your mission. Whatever one's view of gun control and the horrific tragedies through gun violence, isn't your mission to tend to spiritual needs and to bring the Word of the Lord to more people?*

As I see it, this witness is a way of tending to spiritual needs and bringing the Word to more people. If we keep one eye looking in the distance toward the promises of a restored world, at peace and secure, and one eye on what is happening right now, we greet these promises by working toward a world where people are not gunned down living everyday life.

A second email was from a neighbor who appreciated our efforts but who felt there was another mass shooting that should have been included. Ten years ago on Friday, the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin was attacked and 7 people died as a result.

The neighbor who wrote directed me toward commemoration efforts for this 10th anniversary and it led me down an inspiring path. There were many healing actions—both by individuals and by

faith communities that the greater Sikh community has initiated. So many good things that I had absolutely no idea were happening—like something called the Revolutionary Love Project that involved 10s of 1000s of people across the country. Or learning that one of the survivors of the Oak Creek shooting went on to form a center for rehabilitating extremists—and he did this in partnership with a former white supremacist.

You learn about these actions, and it is impossible to see them as anything other than the work of God—and inspiring examples of what it looks like when people keep one eye on the distant promises and one eye on what’s happening now.

The future we hope for *is* coming because the One who makes these promises is God. We greet these promises by living and walking by faith now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.