

FAITH LOOKS TO CHRIST

Hebrews 11:17-12:3

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

August 18, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Letter to the Hebrews*, beginning at chapter 11, verse 17, and reading through chapter 12, verse 3. It is on page 852 of the pew Bible. As we read this text, listen for the key word. Try to identify what it is. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Hebrews 11, beginning at verse 17, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. ²⁰ By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

²³ By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

²⁹ By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

^{12:1} Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word of the day is “faith.” So what is faith? It’s always good to know exactly what a word means.

In college I had a history professor who was something of a logophile. That he means he was a lover of words. He made us subscribe to a word-of-the-day email. We learned words like “addlepatated” and “fideism.” “Addlepatated,” by the way, means “mixed up” or “confused,” and “fideism” means “reliance on faith,” or, we could even say, “faith in faith.” Every week we had a quiz. And while the quiz was mostly on the history we studied that week, one of the words of the day from the previous week would also be on the quiz. And, of course, it wasn’t enough to simply know that the word existed. We couldn’t just write “fideism” on the quiz and get credit. We actually had to know what it meant. We had to know that fideism is faith in your own faith, which, by the way, amounts to nothing. We’ll talk more about that later.

When we learn words, it is essential to also learn what they mean. I’ll give you another example. When a little kid learns the word “ball,” it’s really helpful if he knows what the word means. It’s a round toy. He’s going to have a problem if he thinks any round thing is a ball. Suppose he gets hungry and wants an apple. An apple is round, so he says, “Ball.” Mom and dad give him a ball. Then the child cries, because the ball tastes like rubber. It is essential to know what the word means.

The same thing is true for the word “faith.” “Faith” is our word of the day. It appears fourteen times in the text we just read. And it describes the way all these saints of the Old Testament lived. They all lived by faith. By faith they accomplished heroic deeds and endured great suffering.

So what is faith? If we back up to the beginning of chapter 11, our teacher in Hebrews gives us this definition: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). That’s a pretty good definition, but it’s incomplete. Now you might say, *Whoa, whoa, whoa! That definition is straight out of the Bible. How can you say it’s incomplete?* I say it’s incomplete because it needs context. This is one of those verses that often gets pulled out of context, and it doesn’t mean the same thing when we force it to stand alone. The rest of Hebrews 11 gives us the context. And here’s what we learn when we read it in context: faith is assurance and conviction in things we do not see, but are still real. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” But these “things” must still be real. Faith amounts to nothing if we do not actually trust in something real. So faith does not mean we will get

whatever we want as long as we have enough faith. You might hope to get a promotion at work. You might hope the Twins win the division. You might hope your sickness goes away. But faith in those outcomes will amount to nothing, because those outcomes are not promised to us.

Let's consider the examples given to us. By faith, when God tested Abraham, he began to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (11:17; cf. Gen. 22). Why? Because God had promised Abraham that his offspring would be named through Isaac (11:18; Gen. 21:12). That meant that, according to God's promise, Isaac must live. Abraham considered that God is able to raise the dead (11:19), so he trusted God's promise. He trusted that whatever happened on the mountain of sacrifice, Isaac would live and have offspring. Abraham was not trusting in his own hopes. That would be fideism. He was trusting the Word of God. That is faith.

And Abraham's descendants after him—Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—all blessed their descendants. Why? Was it because they just hoped their descendants would be blessed? No. It was because God had promised to bless them (Gen. 12:2; 15:5; 17:5-8). They did not trust in their own hopes. That, again, would be fideism. They trusted the Word of God. That is faith.

And Moses' parents spared his life when he was born, even though Pharaoh had commanded all the male Hebrew children to be killed (Ex. 1:16). They rightly feared God more than Pharaoh. They believed that their unseen God was real and more powerful than Pharaoh, whom they could see. Regardless of what would happen to them or their child, they knew it was better to obey God rather than men. That is not trusting their own hopes, but trusting in God. That is faith.

And Moses, when he grew up, abandoned his luxurious life in Pharaoh's house. He chose to suffer with the people of God and to be reproached for the sake of Christ. This was not trusting in his own hopes. He actually chose the suffering, because he trusted the one true God. That is faith.

Then, "by faith the people [of Israel] crossed the Red Sea as on dry land" (11:29; Ex. 14). This is kind of a funny one, because if you read about it in Exodus 14, you will see that the people of Israel did not demonstrate much faith. Moses had just led them out of Egypt, and they're standing in front of the Red Sea when Pharaoh's army catches up to them. So the people complain to Moses. They say, "Are there not enough graves in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die?" (Ex. 14:11). In that moment they were not trusting the promise of God to lead them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. But, despite their lack of faith, God still parted the waters of the Red Sea, and they walked across on dry land. And Hebrews says they did this by faith.

So here we see two sides of what it means to live by faith. The first side of the coin is this: God commands us to trust his promises. This is the ideal side of the coin. God wants us to trust him. And when we trust him, this is good. But there's another side of the coin, and sometimes this is the more realistic side: we still have doubts. But "if we are faithless, he remains faithful" (2 Tim. 2:13). Our doubts do not nullify the promises of God. The people of Israel had some very real doubts when they saw Pharaoh's army marching toward them. So what did God do? Did he say, "Fine; if you're not going to trust me with your whole hearts, then I'm going to let you die here?" No! He proved his faithfulness. He opened up the Red Sea despite their faithlessness, and he saved them.

And if we go back to examine Abraham's and Moses' lives, we will find a lot of doubt and whining from them too. That's really the case with most of these "faithful" saints from the Old Testament. Go read about Gideon or Barak. They're both in the book of Judges. And they're kind of cowardly. But God accomplished great things through them, because God promised them he would. So this is faith: not so much that we trust God, but that God has promised us good

things, and he proves his faithfulness over, and over, and over again. The power of faith, or the effectiveness of faith, is not in you. It's in the promises of God. The phrase "by faith" does not mean that these saints of the Old Testament were extraordinarily faithful. It means God kept his promises. And this is the difference between fideism, which will fail you, and faith, which will save you. Fideism trusts in the strength of our own faith. That will fail us because we are weak. Faith trusts the promises of God. That will save us, because the promises of God are certain. Faith does not depend on our faithfulness. Faith depends on God's faithfulness.

Now faith does not always manifest itself in great power and glory. Perhaps more often faith is manifested in great suffering. This is where the list of faithful deeds takes a surprising twist. "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." (11:35-38).

This is where we really see faith at work. It's not in glorious triumph; it's in the endurance of great suffering. Those who suffer in faith, suffer knowing that God has promised something better. They suffer knowing that their temporary affliction cannot compare with the glory to be revealed on the Last Day (Rom. 8:18). Those who suffer by faith are sustained by the promises of God, and especially by the promise of the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day.

When we suffer we want immediate relief, and we've kind of come to expect it. When we get sick there are dozens of over-the-counter pills we can take to instantly minimize our suffering. And that's not bad, but it illustrates our inability to suffer patiently. And so we also want God to fix our problems now. But God has not promised us instant relief. Sometimes our lives are filled with great suffering, and we don't get the relief we want. What sustains us during these times is the promise of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. We may even suffer because we are Christians. Instead of minimizing our pain, our faith could actually be the cause of our suffering. For many Christians around the world, that is exactly the case. But this is where we really see the power of faith in God's saints: when they suffer willingly for the sake of Christ. God has not promised us an easy life. He has not promised us instant relief. But he has promised to be with us in our suffering, and he has promised eternal relief. Our glorious hope is the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. This is the only reason to endure such suffering. And when we trust in the things God has actually promised, we will not be disappointed.

So all these Old Testament saints are given to us as examples of faith. They saw God accomplish great things, and they endured through much suffering. They are good examples.

But there's another twist in this text: After listing all these faithful saints and the various ways they exercised their faith, our teacher in Hebrews tells us not to look at them, but to look to Jesus, for that is where they were looking. Jesus is "the founder and perfecter of our faith" (12:2). He is the one who created our faith, and he will bring it to completion on the Last Day. The example of these Old Testament saints is an example of looking to Christ.

Abraham was looking to Christ. The resurrection of the dead, which Abraham hoped for regarding Isaac if he would have died on the mountain of sacrifice, only comes through Jesus Christ. Abraham was looking to Christ.

Moses is the other main figure in this text, and he also trusted in Jesus Christ. "He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the

reward” (11:26). Moses sacrificed the temporary treasures of Egypt, not for the temporary treasures of the land of Israel, but for the eternal treasures of God’s new creation after the resurrection of the dead. Moses did not leave Egypt behind for the land of Israel. Moses left Egypt behind for heaven. Heaven is the greater, unseen reality that the land of Israel prefigures. Moses never even got to go into the land of Israel. But he will enter God’s new creation after the resurrection of the dead, because he trusted in Christ, and God has promised eternal life to all who trust in Christ.

None of these Old Testament saints received what was promised, because the final fulfillment of the promise has not yet come to pass. This is why the race is still going on. This is why we are still running.

It’s sort of like a relay race. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the other Old Testament saints ran before us. They left us an example of not trusting in their own strength and in their own works, but of trusting in Christ. And now that they have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ, they have passed the baton off to us. Now they surround us as a cloud of witnesses. They’re like our teammates on the side of the track cheering us on. But they’re not shouting, “You can do it,” or, “Run faster.” They’re shouting, “Look to Christ! Fix your eyes on Jesus!” He is “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (12:2).

If you ever have a crisis of faith—and you probably will if you haven’t already. If you ever have a crisis of faith—and I mean the kind where you don’t think your faith is strong enough—you’re probably right. And no, I did not just misspeak, and you did not mishear me. If you ever think that your faith is not strong enough, you’re probably right. And on the flip side, if you ever think your faith *is* strong enough, you’re probably wrong. My best advice for you is this: don’t trust in your faith; trust in Christ. It’s not about you. It’s not about your faith. It’s about Jesus. Look to Christ.

So what do we see when we fix our eyes on Christ? This is the most important part. We see the Son of God in human flesh who joyfully endured the cross. The cross was the most shameful way the Roman Empire could think of to kill a person. It was also brutally painful. But in the case of Jesus, it did not merely involve the public shame and the physical pain, but also the condemnation of the Father, as God poured out all his wrath upon sin as Jesus bore every sin in his body. That is what we see when we fix our eyes on Jesus. We see a beaten and condemned criminal. He’s a disgrace to his own people and condemned by his Father in heaven. But he endures the cross willingly and joyfully, because of what is set before him: the resurrection of the dead, the new creation, and your salvation. Since his shameful crucifixion, Jesus was vindicated in his resurrection, he ascended into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of God, and he is coming again to raise the dead and bring his believing saints into his new creation.

So we look to Christ, not simply because he is the greatest example of enduring suffering unfairly—he is an example of that—but more so because he is our salvation. He has accomplished salvation for us by his life, death, and resurrection. And so we have the forgiveness of our sins now, and we are promised things that we do not yet see: the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life in God’s new creation. We do not see these things yet, but they are no less certain than the shoes on our feet. They are as certain as Jesus’ own resurrection from the dead. And so we trust what we do not see. We fix our eyes of faith on Jesus Christ, the founder and perfecter of our faith, because, as surely as he is risen from the dead and lives forever, he will bring us with him as well. This is the faith that will persevere through suffering, sword, and death. Jesus Christ will bring his believing saints into his new creation. Amen.

FAITH LOOKS TO CHRIST (Hebrews 11:17-12:3)

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.