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Faith is a part of our lives every day. Faith is not unique to Christianity. Even people who are agnostics and atheists are full of faith in many objects. By faith I sit at a computer and hit keys and words appear. I can travel to sites located somewhere unseen and information appears, and people send me messages even though I can't see them and don't know where they are but they communicate with me so I know they exist. This all happens without me having the slightest understanding of how exactly it all works.

By faith I punch numbers into a cell phone and again, without understanding exactly how it works, and I am able to use it to communicate with unseen persons even though I don't even know where they are. I have very limited knowledge and understanding of what is happening that I can't see inside both my computer and cell phone. I only use a tiny fraction of their potential, but I am convinced they work and they help me and that if I spent more time learning about them I could get so much more out of them while feeling a little wiser and a little more capable.

By faith we get into a car, put a key into a slot and turn it, and even if we're totally ignorant about the process going on under the hood, we trust the car will come to life and take us where we want to go. Some cars require more faith than others. By faith, many people drove here today, trusting all the other drivers and bicyclists would be faithful, fulfilling their responsibility to observe the rules of the road by driving on the correct side and obeying all traffic signs. You came into this room and sat down, automatically committing yourself by faith to pew, assuming it would hold you. You go to your doctor and he or she writes out a prescription you can't read. You take it to a pharmacist who deciphers the scrawls and gives you a bottle of pills and says, "*Take this three times a day,*" and by faith, you do exactly what she says.

It is impossible to live without faith. Faith is a part of our lives every day. Listen to what Hebrews 11:1-6 tells us about Faith.

"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. 4

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his **faith** he still speaks. 5

By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had **pleased God.**" 6 And **without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.**"

Let's pray,

O Lord, who orders all things for our eternal good, mercifully enlighten our minds, and give us a firm and abiding faith in your love and care in the midst of the challenges and opportunities of our life. Silence our murmurings, quiet our fears, and dispel our doubts, that, rising above our afflictions and our anxieties, we may trust in you, the one of everlasting strength. Amen.

Two repeated words that stand out in the verses from Hebrews 11:1-6 are **faith and approval**. Clearly a relationship is being emphasized between faith and God's approval. Defining faith as "*assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*" This is not a complete definition of faith, the preacher is naming the aspects of faith he or she hopes to encourage among believers who were wavering in their conviction and in the practice of their faith. They weren't as regular in gathering to worship, their energy and zeal were lagging for doing good, they needed some inspiration and a reminder about what faith is all about.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for – this describes **what faith has**: it already possesses in the *present* what God has promised for the *future*.

Faith is partly an **inward reality and partly an outward force**.

Inwardly, people of faith have confidence today even when all hell seems to be breaking loose around us, that the promises of God for peace, justice, mercy, and salvation can be trusted.

Faith is **a response to the trustworthiness of God**.

That response leads to **outward action**. So we have faith both as an inward assurance and we embody our faith by putting it into action in the world.

Faith as inward reality believes God's promise that one day "*mourning and crying and pain will be no more*" (Rev. 21:4). Faith as an outward reality we put into action in the

world prays for those who mourn, comforts those who weep, works to ease the pain of those who are wounded.

The first part of the meaning of faith is *what faith has* – inward assurance leading to outward action.

The second part describes *what faith perceives*. Faith sees what is not visible to the eye. Hebrews says, “**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.”

I like the story of a college philosophy professor who asked only one question on his final exam. He picked up a chair, put it on his desk, and wrote on the board, “*Using everything we have learned this semester, prove that this chair does not exist.*” The students dug deep and wrote like crazy for an hour, some of them churning out 30 pages of heady philosophy and logic in their little blue books. But one student turned in her paper after less than a minute. Turned out she was the only one to get an “A.” Her answer – “*What chair?*”

Paul writes in 2 Cor. 4:18; 5:7, “*What can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal*”; “*we walk by faith, not sight.*” Our eyes see a world of suffering, violence, hardship, selfishness, stupidity and incompetence. When we look with the eyes of faith we are still perplexed but we also see the signs of God’s grace in the midst of the toil and trouble of the world as people of faith put their faith in action. We also look at the vastness of the cosmos that God created and we regain a little perspective.

Today in the comic strip Opus, Oliver, a boy who loves science, is giving Opus and the others a little information. Opus begins saying, “*I love these summer evening reality checks from Oliver.*” Oliver then says, “Hold out a speck of sand at arm’s length, that’s the portion of the night sky at which they pointed the Hubble telescope for a week. It was there – deep within that dot of dark nothingness ten billion light years distant – that they found the unexpected. Galaxies! Thousands! **Thousands!** ...With **Billions of stars!** And **Trillions** of new worlds. And beyond those ...**MORE!** All in the space of a single grain of sand on the vast beach of the cosmos. Which nicely frames the question man has been asking for millennia.” “*What question?*” asks a boy. “*What’s the center of it all?*” Both boys and Opus have little thinking bubbles above their heads with their answers. “*Me. Me. Me, baby.*”

Rick Warren began his best selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* with the four words, “*It’s not about you.*” Yet it sometimes seems like many Christians today want God to conform to their world view, their politics, their preferences and desires – they want

God to conform to their agenda. That is backwards. If we have learned anything as we have journeyed together through the books of the Bible it is that God has an agenda, a purpose, and a plan and wants God's people to learn what it is and to become faithful, active participants in that agenda – in the God movement that is at work in the world.

Hebrews 11 is overflowing with examples of people who lived by Faith – I am very briefly going to touch on just the first three who are mentioned - Abel and Enoch and Noah who were righteous and approved by God because of their faith.

Abel's story is in Genesis 4:1-16. He is the second son of Adam and Eve, a keeper of sheep, who made an acceptable offering from his flock to God, and was subsequently murdered by his jealous brother. This tells us that sibling rivalry is ancient and that the farmer-herder conflict is the oldest one in the Bible. No words of Abel are recorded while he is alive, but Genesis 4:10 says that his blood cries out from the ground to God who hears his plea. It appears that God considered Abel to be righteous and approved of him, **since God's approval is one of the marks of faith.** Abel died but through his faith he still speaks. In one sense it speaks as do the deeds of faithful people that reverberate through the years even long after they are gone. Abel's blood, the blood of innocent suffering, cries out to God for justice, even as the blood of the innocent who suffer today still cries out to God for justice. Abel is in a way, a foreshadowing of Jesus. Like Jesus, Abel was approved by God and offered a sacrifice that was acceptable to God. Abel's blood, like that of Jesus, makes intercession to God. However, there the comparison ends as later Hebrews tells us that Jesus blood speaks a "*better word than the blood of Abel* (Hebrews 12:24)." **Abel's blood cries out for revenge, but Jesus' blood brings an end to vengeance and grants forgiveness** (9:22; 10:10). Abel gave sacrificially and was approved by God.

Enoch walked with God and Genesis 5:24 mysteriously states that "God took him." Hebrews believes that Enoch was so pleasing to God that he was taken directly to heaven without having to go through the door of death. Like Enoch we can please God by approaching God as Enoch did, "*by believing that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him* (11:6)." That means we have confidence in the God who exists, the God who lives, and we have faith that serving this God really matters.

To believe that God exists is to have a profound "*conviction of things not seen.*" Jill and I went for a walk on Breakwater Beach here in Brewster on Friday morning just after 9:00 which was low tide. The Brewster flats stretched out in all its shades of tan reaching out toward the horizon where the blue water had receded out of reach. After we

had walked east for about ten minutes we noticed two men by a motor boat that was sitting on the barren flats. One guy was standing next to the boat with what looked like a bait bucket. Two fishing poles were visible in the boat. The other man was sitting in the boat looking out toward the water. I didn't know whether to laugh, whether I should ask them if they knew how long it would be before the water returned. I said to Jill, "I wish I had a camera – talk about **“faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”** The water wasn't seen anywhere nearby but they had faith it was coming near, even if they would have to wait for it for a while. Hebrews 11 warns us that **sometimes faith requires waiting**, but we wait in faith believing that God exists and that God rewards those who seek the Lord. To believe that God rewards those who seek him is not to look for winning lottery tickets but that God rewards in God's terms with mercy, peace, and wholeness.

Noah (Hebrews 11:7) is an example **for his response to the word of God**. In Genesis 6:8-9:17, God told Noah about an event in the unseen world of the future. There was no evidence in the sensory world to back up this word, so Noah had a choice to make to trust what he saw with his own eyes or to have faith in God's word. It was the world or God. Noah chose God and did something that made no sense in worldly terms – **he built an ark to weather a storm no one else could see coming**. Through his faith in God's word, Noah received the strength, focus, and determination to make good choices and do what God wanted done.

Abel, Enoch, and Noah, were pleasing to God and received God's approval because of their faith. The rest of Hebrews 11 goes on to describe some of the people in The Faith Hall of Fame who pleased God because they were righteous – **like Abel who gave sacrificially to God, Enoch who walked with God, and Noah who responded in faith to God's word**. Hebrews also describes those who journeyed through life obediently and those who were tested by suffering who responded by faith.

We also can please God through our faith. As we give sacrificially, walk with God in our daily lives, respond in faith to God's word, journey through life obediently, and remain steadfast in suffering – we will find our faith in unseen realities grow and deepen – even if we still don't understand everything about God or faith. But we do know that **faith is an inward reality that becomes an outward force that shapes our behavior and our actions**.

Talking about the faith of Noah – a recent film *Evan Almighty* is a kind of retelling of the Noah story. While the boys and I enjoyed it, the film was not well received by the

critics. It will never be confused with cinematic classics like those directed by Ingmar Bergman, who died this past Monday at the age of 89. The TV show The Colbert Report has an occasional segment called "Cheating Death," which is introduced by the image of Stephen facing the hooded figure of Death over a chessboard. That's a reference to the 1957 film The Seventh Seal, a medieval morality play written and directed by Ingmar Bergman. Colbert, who switches chess pieces while Death is distracted, parodies the role of a knight (Max von Sydow) who puts his soul on the line to save a few lives during a season of plague.

The story goes that a young Bobby Fischer was watching the film and when Death says checkmate, and it appears the game is over, Bobby Fisher said,

"No, wait, it's not over, **the king has one more move.**"

That is the meaning of faith – it is the belief and the conviction that no matter how bleak the situation appears – the king has one more move.

When our troubles seem to be too much, we remember the king has one more move.

When the world seems to be hopeless lost, we remember the king has one more move.

Even when we feel cornered and have no way out, we have faith and hope because we believe, the king has one more move.

Great Passages in Hebrews

3:12-14, *"Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end."*

12:14-15 *"Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled."*

Hebrews 10:22-25, *"let us approach with a true heart **in full assurance of faith**, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. **And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**"*

Read **Before Communion** Hebrews 9:24-28, 10:10

“For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

Blessing: Hebrews 13:20-21

“Now may the God of peace,
who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus,
the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant,
make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will,
working among us that which is pleasing in his sight,
through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”