

“Conviction of Things Not Seen”

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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24, Luke 12:22-40

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Her name was Betsy. She had been sick for a long time, but she always came to church with her rollator and oxygen tank and sat in the front row. She loved Pentecost and wearing hats and the color red. I was on my way back home from a weekend at Camp Chanco, when I got the call that she was near death and might even have already died, so I went straight to the hospital from the ferry. When I arrived in her room, I was delighted to find that not only was she not dead; she was alert and awake and happy to see me.

As I prayed with her, I could tell that she already had one foot in the next life. She was seeing something I couldn't see.

“Jesus, you're here,” she said. “I never doubted you. You're so beautiful. God you are so beautiful.”

Betsy was so beautiful as she gazed upon her Lord. Her face was radiant, and she seemed to shine with an inner light. She was ready for what was to come next. She was at peace and was seeing the face of Christ. Whatever had happened in her life, she knew that nothing could separate her from the love of God, not even death.

In those moments, I caught a glimpse of the kingdom that God has promised. Seeing the radiance shining from her face, watching as her eyes drank in the new

life that was coming, I saw the assurance that she had hoped for, the conviction of things that she hadn't seen until then. She had walked in faith, lived in faith, and two days later would die in faith.

In those moments, my faith was strengthened as I realized once again that God redeems everything and that we will one day live in that heavenly city with God. I couldn't see what she was seeing, but I could see her face as she beheld it, and it filled me with the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Even so, it's not easy to hold.

Faith is one of those things that we write books about and think about and talk about and worry about, and at the end of all that thinking, talking, worrying and writing, we still can't pinpoint it. We can't prove it or provide scientific evidence for it.

Sometimes our faith is weak, and sometimes our faith is strong. Sometimes we wonder if we ever had any faith and at other times, we worry that we just don't have enough. Sometimes we stand firm in faith no matter how the storms roar around us. Other times faith is as elusive as trying to catch fog in your hand.

I have a friend who loves the story of the mustard seed. "You only need this much faith," she loves to say. "Just this much. The size of a tiny seed." And God does the rest. God - whom we hope for, God - who is not seen.

Faith in what has been promised is something that we don't know here (head) but here (heart.)

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

It's hard to hold onto that hope of the kingdom of God coming, whether in this world or the next. It's hard when we're focused on all the things of daily life, the worries and frustrations of getting through each day and getting our loved ones through each day. It's hard when all our screens show a constant flow of images of war, famine, disaster, cruelty, injustice, oppression. It's hard when we feel the weight of things done and left undone both individually and collectively.

One source of encouragement when we face events that challenge our faith is hearing the stories of the faithful who have come before us. Hebrews 11 references the stories of the faithful throughout scripture. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. If you read all of Hebrews 11, and I encourage you to do so, you'll see mention of even more stories: Enoch, Noah, Moses, Rahab, Joseph, Samson, David, Samuel and others. It's by stories that we know what we know about faith. Faith just about what we know here in our intellect; it's about what we know here in our hearts and here in our guts. It is the way that we live.

By faith Abraham said yes when God called him to leave his home and set out for a promised land he had never seen. He didn't know where he was going or whether he would ever return. It was faith that enabled him to keep following God's call when things got difficult, even when it seemed that he was too old for the thing he most hoped for – having a son. God kept telling him he would be the father of nations, and he was. Abraham continued to have faith because he considered the one faithful who had promised. Abraham didn't trust in his own faith – he trusted in the one he believed to be faithful.

The trouble with faith is that we want proof. We don't just want to have faith; we want to know with certainty that everything's going to come out right.

At least I do. And then, when things don't come out right or when things don't come out the way we want them to, our faith gets shaken. Abraham and Sarah were able to conceive in old age. What about the people who are never able to have a child? What about the people who experience the death of their child? What about when the bad times come? How do we sustain our faith then?

The writer of Hebrews doesn't sugar coat it. He says that our ancestors in faith died without having received the promises. Think of Moses - after leading the Hebrew people out of Egypt and through the wilderness for 40 years, he never got to enter the promised land. But he did get to see it. And he died in faith, in that assurance of things hoped for, the better country, the heavenly country. Some things don't work out the way we wanted or hoped that they would. And we can trust God anyway, even when things feel out of control, even when we can't see the way ahead, even when it seems that evil and injustice will win the day.

We trust God because God is trustworthy. We have faith in God because God is faithful. We believe in the promises because God is the one who has promised.

Do not be afraid little flock.

Be ready and dressed for action.

Keep your lamps lit.

Put your treasure where your heart is, not the other way around.

Do not be afraid. It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Even if we can only catch a glimpse of it until the day we see God face to face, that is enough.