

August 19, 2012

## Scripture Lessons

*Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16*

*John 11:1-3, 8-16*

**Sermon**      *Faith: Assurance and Conviction*

A few years ago the whole nation, I think, if you remember back to those few years, was shocked to learn that a South Carolina woman had driven her car with her two children into the lake and killed them, and then claimed they had been kidnapped and led the authorities on quite a merry chase. The day the news broke about what really happened, a woman in the grocery store looked at my two then very little boys and she raged and she said, "Can you believe what Mrs. Smith did to her children? Then we went to the doctor's office for an ear infection and before asking about the ear, the doctor said, "Doesn't it make you sick about what happened to those children in South Carolina?"

That year I guess I managed to travel in circles where people were not endlessly fascinated because that was the same year when O.J. and Nicole were in the news. But instead I traveled in circles where there were very young children, and the people thought of Mrs. Smith and these two young boys. As O.J. and Nicole made us wonder about how many relationships hide violence behind a facade of wealth Susan Smith made us wonder how many children are truly endangered even in the midst of their family. We remembered how often some of us had perhaps had been even on the brink of hurting our own children whether be out of rage or despair and then we remembered thankfully, prayerfully that thread of sanity that pulled us back and made us get help or just to take a break until parenting seemed to be a manageable thing again.

One person even said to me, it makes you want to hug your kids tight maybe because we know how just how precious and vulnerable our children are. If we go beyond our fascination with the latest plane crash or the latest murder or latest mass shooting, I think the theological question arises from all of these things.

I think we are here today because you and I dream of a world where women are not beaten up and murdered by the men that they love. I think we dream of a place where children are safe with their mothers and even safe with strangers. I think we dream of a world where racism doesn't make African, Latinos', easy targets for false accusations. I think we yearn for a place where life is whole

again. In a world where nations fight and where families struggle for food and sometimes even for sanity, the Gospel of Jesus Christ holds out a vision of peace.

You and I have been promised that every tear will be wiped away someday. If we claim God is working to mend all of the creation and in Jesus Christ that work is now accomplished. But then we step back and ask ourselves, where in the world is that accomplishment? We haven't seen a lot of it in the world today. We see the cares and the fabric of life and how easily frayed life is and maybe we even wonder how to hold on to the hope of mending and the world spreads out before us sometimes in shreds.

Then comes the letter to the Hebrews, a letter addressed to a group of Jewish Christians who are deeply, deeply distressed. Persecution in their day is on the rise and the vision of hope that they received from the Gospel of Jesus seems like a way far away dream. They are worn out and those people need some rest. The writer wants to encourage them on their journey and so he speaks to them of this word that I was speaking to the boys and girls about-- faith.

The writer says faith is the assurance of things hoped for; faith is the conviction of things not seen. Faith then not unlike some of our brothers and sisters in Christ and their belief, isn't a belief in a particular doctrine rather faith is the conviction of what God has promised us in Jesus will someday come to pass. It is that trust that we even though we don't see the results right now that we hoped for, God is nevertheless at work for us for good and for our salvation.

The writer goes on to tell stories to illustrate this point and he recalls two important people from the Old Testament, Abraham and Sarah. They left their home on the thread of a promise that they would inherit a great land. They did not know where they were going and they never received the land that they were promised. They and the next generation in fact, lived as refugees in the land that they thought God meant would be theirs. They longed for a home with permanent walls but instead they continued to live in tents. And they could have turned tail and run back but they held on and they held on tight and they died without receiving what was promised.

The book of Job tells the story if you recall of someone that suffered greatly but at the end everything was restored to him double but these people are the opposite of the story of Job. They were promised many things and they never did lived to see the hope fulfilled but this author tells us they were convinced that the promises of God would be kept and so they continued to live as refugees but thought in their minds and hearts of themselves as citizens. In old age they had one child but they thought of themselves as parents of a great nation. They were able to hold on to their hope and remain sure of the promises of God would someday would come to pass nevertheless. Even though they did not see that day they

glimpsed it from a long ways a way and they were able to keep on with their work, they were able to live and able to die in peace.

What I wonder if the same for refugees even today who are longing for a home but still living in tents. What the same people like us, the struggle spreads out before us, sometimes with no relief in sight. What is on the road when the vision which we are holding on to seems a long, long way away?

I don't think the answer is just the power of positive thinking. The author doesn't tell the Hebrew just to look on the bright side of life or promises that someday things will get better. Rather he recalls how they were persecuted before and how they had their possessions taken from them and yet they were still able to visit each other in prison; they were able to encourage one another through those hard times.

Faith in these circumstances is always a gift and you and I know that. Here it a gift that comes from taking hearts the stories of other faithful people who had held on in the midst of tragedy. Faith, I think, in this sense is quite contagious if we keep our eyes and ears open. Sarah and Abraham held on to just those little signs that I speak of; the promise of God would be fulfilled. When Isaac was born Sarah took his birth as a sign that the promises of God would come to pass.

You know, a woman fearing a miscarriage is still hanging on to the fact that she can still button her skirt around herself as a positive sign. A man looks for a job and holds on to that one good interview as a sign that tide is soon going to turn in the job search. A community or nation torn by violence clings to stories of people helping each other across the lines of hostility. Those small signs don't bring you all the way in this journey of faith but they can help you to hold on just a little bit longer day by day. Mostly though the author of Hebrews believed that Abraham and Sarah had faith, faith that the promise would be fulfilled because they believed that God is faithful; God had been with them in the past and so they believed that God would be faithful in the future as well.

For years people in the South Africa worked for peace and not seeing any results but sure that God created a world in which there should be harmony between the races. People with Aids experienced healing even in the face of death because they know God is a God of life and would never let them go. And you and I tell stories God has brought people through terrible storms who have mended the tears in the fabric of life and still calls us believe that life will again be whole someday. God will not let us; God will not this world go; and God invites us to be partners in bringing about that vision that Jesus sets before us.

You know our communion table which is here each Sunday morning and we gathered around a couple of weeks ago. I think. Is one of the visible signs that you and I hold on and one of the stories that we tell in the midst of difficult times. Those little bites of bread and those small little cups of juice that we share together

I kind of look at it as appetizers for a banquet that everybody in the world is invited were there will be enough for everybody in the world is invited. There will enough for everybody someday in this world. This table doesn't get us all the way there, but, I think, is a sneak preview of the world vision of Jesus is somehow fulfilled. This table I think also tells us another story of faith. It tells us about Jesus himself who held on to the vision of God's kingdom even in the midst of death. Jesus resurrection is a promise to the world that God is a faithful God; that life can overcome death; that the promises of God will someday be fulfilled.

So in a world at war; in a world where children are murdered; where hopes are long in coming, each of us is invited to come together in this place week after week and be a part of strengthening those around us and helping in the work of mending God's creation because maybe, just maybe we will be filled with faith in the process and this promise will somehow, somehow, this promise in the midst of difficulty will be kept.

And all God's people said AMEN