

July 20 2014

**Scripture Lessons ~**

*Psalm 139*

*Genesis 28: 10-19a,*

*Hebrews 11:1-3*

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

Several years ago, our nation was shocked to learn that a woman in South Carolina had driven her car with her two children inside the car into a lake. The children drowned but she claimed that they had been kidnapped and led the authorities on a merry chase for quite some time. The day the news broke, a woman in the grocery store looked at my boys, who were a little bit smaller at that time, sitting in the grocery cart and she raged in my face and she said “Can you believe what that Susan Smith did to her children in that lake.” And then later on that day, we went to the doctor for an ear infection and before asking about the ears, the doctor also vented in my face, “Doesn’t it make you sick as what happened to those children in South Carolina.”

I suppose that year I managed to travel in circles where people were not endlessly, endlessly fascinated with O.J. Simpson but were in circles where the lots and lots of children and people thought of that Susan Smith and those two little boys. You know that year O.J. and Nicole made us wonder how many relationships hide violence behind the façade of wealth and power. Susan Smith’s situation made us wonder how many children in our world are truly in danger. We remember how often during the course of that time and even our family circles, even amongst our own friends, parents being on the brink of hurting their own children whether in rage or despair. Then we remembered those threads of sanity that pulls those friends and relatives back and made them get some help or a take a break until parenting manage to be able to carry through at that time as well. One person said, and I agreed with them fully, it really makes you just grab your kids and give them a great big hug. No matter what the situation is because we know precious and how truly vulnerable our children really are.

You know if we can somehow see beyond the sensationalism which the press often treats these kinds of stories serious questions of faith arise in the face of these modern day events, for example, I don't have a shadow of doubt that we are here today because we dream of a world where women are not beaten up or murdered by the men that love them; where children are safe with their mothers or even with strangers. We dream of a world where people don't mistrust or kill each other because of their religion, or their race, or their nationality, or because they are different from other people. Where, when the dust settles and all is said and done, life can be whole again for us to live. In a world where nations fight, or families in this country and all around the world struggle for the necessities of life and for a little bit of the sense of sanity, the Gospel of Jesus Christ holds out for us, I think a vision of peace. We have been promised that every tear will be wiped away. We proclaim that God is working to mend our creation and that in Jesus that work is already accomplished. But then we say to ourselves, where is that work accomplished? We have not completely seen just yet. We see the tears in fabric of life all around us and how easily life can be frayed and we wonder how to hold on to hope, the hope of mending the world when it spread out before us in sense of shreds.

Then we come to the letter to the Hebrews, which is addressed to a group of Jewish Christians who are deeply distressed, persecution in their area of the world is on the rise. And their vision of hope that they received from the Gospel seems like one of those far away day dreams. They are worn out. They need a rest and so the writer wants to encourage them on their journey of faith so that he speaks to them of faith along the way. And the author says these familiar words, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, faith is the conviction of things not seen".

Faith is then isn't belief in just a doctrine, rather faith is the conviction that what God has promised in Jesus Christ will come to pass. It is the trust that even though we don't see the results of things that we hoped for, God is still at work for good reconciling us to himself and to our friends and neighbors. And then the writer goes on to tell stories to

illustrate the point as Marty shared with us. He recalls how Abraham and Sarah left their home on the thread of a promise that they would inherit a great land. They did not know where they were going, they never did receive that promise in themselves, and they and the next generation lived in fact as refugees in the land that they thought should be theirs. They longed for a home with permanent walls instead of living in tents. But this author tells us they were nevertheless convinced that since the promises of God would be kept. So they lived as refugees but thought of themselves as full citizens in the land. In old age they had one child but they saw themselves as parents of a whole nation of children. They were able to hold on to their hope and remain sure that the promises of God would come to pass even though they did not see the day; they glimpsed from long way and were able to keep with their work and live and die with a sense of peace.

In thinking about this last night when I was going through my sermon for today, I wondered what in the world the thinking of the refugees in our own. We have been talking about the situation of the fires and in a sense of all of those people who lost their homes are refugees. What gives them hope in the midst of the tragedy they face? What gives those people and those children and their parents gathered on our southern border with Mexico hope? What gives people in Syria scattered all over the Middle East hope?

People even to this day are longing for a home and still living in make-shift houses. What about the rest of us as our current struggles of life sort of fan out before with us with seemly no sign of relief? What happens on our life journey when the vision we are holding seems so far away in distance? I know one thing, the answer is not just the power of positive thinking. That might be one component. But the author of Hebrews doesn't tell the folks that he is addressing to look on the bright side of life. He doesn't say that things are just going to get better the future. Rather, he recalls that how they were persecuted, before how they had their homes and possessions taken away, yet somehow they were still able to visit each other in prison and take hope from that and encourage each others through the hard times.

Facing all these kinds of circumstances is truly a gift and here is the gift that comes from taking heart in the midst of the difficulty; taking heart from the stories of others who held on before us and persevered in their dream. Sarah and Abraham held on to the little signs that would be fulfilled too when Isaac was born. Abraham and Sarah took his birth as a sign that the promises of God would come to pass. And a contemporary example is just like a man looking for a job holds on to that really good interview as a sign that soon the time will come. A small sign brings us a little bit of the way, not all the way but a little bit, so we can hold on a little bit longer in the face of adversity. But, most of all, though the author to the Hebrews tells us Abraham and Sarah had faith in that the promises of God would be fulfilled because they believe that God was faithful. God had been with them in the past and so they believed that God would be faithful in the present and in the future as well.

You know for years and years people in South Africa who worked for peace were certain that God had created the world to live in peace and harmony. Many people with debilitating cancer or age experience a kind of inner feeling even in the face of death because they know God is a God of life who would not let them go. And then we tell stories of how God brought people with terrible storms in life and who mended the tears of life, still calls us to help with tasks mending creation, but in small ways, day by day, person by person, one situation at a time, believing that life again can be made whole. God will not let us; God will not let this world go. God invites us to be partners in bringing about that vision in our lives.

Now I have spoken to you about this before, but in times like these, I remind us continually that our communion table is one of the signs that we hold on to. It is one of the stories that we tell in the midst of adversity because those little bits of bread and those little sips of juice that we share together are in sense appetizers for the heavenly banquet to come where everybody is invited and where there will be enough for everybody to share together. You know this table doesn't get us all the way there, but it gives us deep preview of a world where this vision is

fulfilled. And the table also tells us another story of faith of about Jesus Christ himself who held on to the vision of God's kingdom even in the face of his own death. Jesus' resurrection is then is a promise to our entire world. God will be faithful. Life will overcome death and the promises of God will be fulfilled. So in a world where children do get murdered, lives are shattered, where planes crash and bombs occur, and where hopes are sometimes long in coming each of us is still in the midst of all these things and we are invited to pray, and to sing, and to worship, and to receive Jesus in the midst of life. He is the bread of life and will be strength for our part in the work of mending creation. My hope and my dream for all of us today is that we will be filled with the faith that this promise of God will be kept and will be true.

And together we say AMEN