

**Year C: Proper 14a Is 1:1, 10-20; Ps 50:1-8; Heb 11:1-3, 8-16; Lk 12:32-40  
St. Barnabas, Florissant – August 11, 2019**

**Focus Sentence:** “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

**I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” So it is claimed in this morning’s reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. Of course, this is one of the more quoted and thus more familiar verses of the Scriptures, and so maybe we’ve become a bit insulated from, and deaf to, its real truth. We live in a time and place where we become too quickly impatient about “things hoped for.”

**PAUSE**

The writer of Hebrews asserts that “by faith our ancestors received approval.” And to give proof to this assertion, the writer cites several examples of the ancestors who received that approval through their faith, through their trust that things hoped for would actually occur and that things not seen would prove to be real. Of course, we forget those stories of our ancestors in the faith, stories that often took hundreds of years or more, and untold effort and pain, to work themselves out.

**PAUSE**

First, we have Abraham, whose name was Abram “when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.” Abram was promised land and, two different times, descendants and heirs beyond counting (like the stars of heaven, it was put.) But what did Abram really get during his lifetime?

He and his wife Sarai got *one son*, Isaac --- not exactly what we’d normally call “descendants and heirs numbering as many as the stars of heaven.”

And as for the land he was promised, Abram got exactly one piece of property in his lifetime. Know what it was? It was a cemetery plot Abram purchased from Ephron the Hittite; you can read the details in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Genesis.

So, “by faith,” as Hebrews puts it, during his lifetime Abram got a baby boy and a cemetery plot. That’s all. But, “by faith,” Abram could take the longer view, trusting in God, and then imagine that these tiny beginnings would develop into something much, much bigger in God’s time. And, of course, we know they did.

Abram, Abraham, was among those ancestors who died in faith without having received the *fullness* of the promises. But from a distance, he saw and greeted those promises, as Hebrews puts it.

## **PAUSE**

Moses, who is cited later on in this chapter of Hebrews, was the one who “by faith” led the people out of bondage in Egypt, through the Red Sea, and on into the Promised Land, the land in fact which had so very long ago been promised to Abram.

Moses’ sister Miriam and his brother Aaron, who both gave Moses spiritual nourishment and kept him going, died long before they got to the Promised Land. They never made it, although they were full of faith themselves.

And, of course, Moses himself never made it either. He only got to stand on Mt. Nebo and LOOK into the Promised Land; and on Mt. Nebo he died. All those years in the desert, with those complaining and rebellious people, and he never made it!

Of course, Moses “by faith” knew that he had a part in this great movement that God had unleashed. And sometimes, it’s good enough just to KNOW that such a great movement we’ve had a part in will eventually come to fruition.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King also comes to mind. If you recall, Dr. King too spoke of having been “by faith” “to the mountaintop,” of having envisioned the Promise someday fulfilled, although he would die before that fulfillment would come to complete passage. You and I, of course, are still looking for the completion of that promise.

## **PAUSE**

Hebrews goes on to list a whole catalog of other ancestors in the faith --- Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel and the prophets --- our ancestors “who by faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight.”

And yet, all these, even though they were notable for their faith, never got to receive the fullness of what was promised.

## PAUSE

Today, our congregation of St. Barnabas is “by faith” standing on a mountaintop, straining to peer into the future. Like Abram, we’re setting out on a journey not knowing where we’ll end up. Like Abram and Sarai, like Moses and all those other ancestors in the faith, we’re being called by God to move into an unknown future where we’re promised that we’ll share in God’s mission to this part of God’s world. Will any of us live to see the fullness of that promise? I don’t know, but we’ve got to remember that God’s plan is enormous; God is working to save *an entire universe*. Our particular vision, right here and right now, can unfortunately become too narrow, and then we begin questioning whether *I specifically* am succeeding at any given moment.

But our gift of faith is what sets us free from those narrow visions and the accompanying self-obsession. Faith sets us free from worrying about what might look like failure and futility today. Remember Abram had *one child* of promise and a *cemetery plot*; he looked for all the world like a failure. But faith gave him the power to take a longer view.

And faith takes us into this enormous, eons-long, work of God, that great story of promise that is continuing, even in our own lifetimes, and no doubt long beyond them.

## PAUSE

Faith reminds us that Mt. Nebo isn't such a bad place to stand, and allows us to be happy when we do end up there and can envision the future fulfillment of the promise. Let's move together on this journey to where we don't know but be humbly grateful for our part in it.

That, my sisters and brothers, really is faith. That really is "the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen."

**AMEN**

(Loosely adapted from G. W. Smith sermon of 8-8-2010)