



11th Sunday after Pentecost

August 8, 2010

“By Faith”

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Prayer: Let your steadfast love be upon us, O Lord, even as we hope in you.

One of the interests I have that I have not actively pursued is that of exploring my family tree. This interest in family ancestry began at an early age. How early, I don't remember. What I do remember, is talking with both sets of grandparents to learn more about the family history. The stories I learned from my grandparents were priceless. I learned how one relative settled in the Cleveland, Ohio area under a homestead act. I heard how distant relatives landed on Ellis Island, and eventually made their way to Ohio. I heard how several relatives arriving from either Germany or Hungary shortened their names in order to be more “Americanized”. Personally, I think it was because they did not want their children to be traumatized on having to fill in the circles for standardized tests, but I could be mistaken.

Over the years, this interest in family history has faded slightly. As relatives have entered their eternal rest, the family stories have become less frequent. Being here in Pennsylvania, and with most of my family either in Ohio or New York have meant infrequent times of visiting and sharing. On the other hand, my dad has developed an interest in the family history. He has easily spent hours on the internet searching and researching last names common on his side of the family. The current work in progress is several pages long.

Our reading from Hebrews today is a lot like a family tree. This family tree goes back to the very beginning, the very heart of faith and the promises of God. Our lectionary skips this part of Hebrews, but the promises of God go back to Abel, Enoch, and Noah before coming to Abraham and Sarah. Hebrews continues with Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, Moses and the Israelites among others.

The beauty of Hebrews is that it does not go into all the detail and complexities of life. Rather, it offers a two word statement of how those who wrestled, and struggled were able to rely on God's unfailing promises, "by faith"

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death.

By faith, Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household.

By faith Abraham obeyed.

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise. . . .

By faith. Two words, that when combined, say so much about who we are, and how we live as Christians. It means knowing – and trusting in a God who is bigger than us. It means knowing we do not have all the answers – and accepting the reality we do not have all the answers. It means trusting – that when we search for answers, when we wrestle with life, our worries and our fears, God's promises hold fast.

There are times in life where it seems as though both God's promises and living by faith are empty. It can seem difficult to trust, to believe when the promises do not come true when they want them to. Abraham knew that. In our reading for today, Abraham is impatient with God. God has promised Abraham would be the father of many nations. In Abraham's mind, this promise has not come true. Abraham fears this promise will not come true in his lifetime.

God, however, has other plans for Abraham. God reminds—and assures Abraham that this promise will indeed come true. God makes clear to Abraham that there will be a delay in the fulfillment of this promise. Not immediately, as Abraham hopes, but in God's time.

In terms of humanity, not much has changed since Abraham. True, there have been astounding advances over the centuries. But in terms of humanity, we still have the same reactions our biblical ancestors did. We grow impatient when we do not see God's promises unfolding in the way we think they should. We begin to think God has forgotten us. We fear we might be left out of God's promises and God's plan.

Our world in the twenty-first century can add to our reactions. Whether over the internet, the radio, television, or the newspaper, the media gives us reasons to be fearful. When we are afraid, when we are frightened, we forget those two powerful and important little words: 'by faith'.

I once had a poster with a kitten on it. The kitten was hanging from a knot at the end of a rope. The caption of the poster read, "Faith isn't faith until it's all you're holding on to." Not to trivialize faith, but even though that poster is long since gone, there is indeed a good bit of truth to that caption: faith is not faith until it's all you're holding on to. Meaning, there are those times in life we find ourselves clinging to our faith. In those times, we may not be certain of what is ahead of us. We may not know the path our lives are taking. The fears and worries we have – whether real or imagined – can seem overwhelming. In the midst of clinging to our faith, we may feel as though we are losing our grip, and holding on by the edge of our finger nails.

This is where faith comes in. Even in those times when life seems confusing, difficult, frustrating, lonely; even in those times where life contains company, excitement, happiness, and joy, faith boldly hangs on to the promises it has received.

Since our founding in 1876, Mt. Eden has had its share of struggles and challenges. Some of the challenges you have shared with me; other challenges have yet to be heard and learned. As we look back, like our reading from Hebrews, the response of how these challenges were met are contained again in two words, "by faith".

As we continue partnering together in ministry, we continue also in the family tree of faith – by faith. We know not what the future holds, but we trust that by faith, God will continue the work that has already been started. We trust by faith – that God will continue to guide us and lead us how and where God wants us to be: today, tomorrow, the next day, and the next day, and into the future.

Thanks be to God! Amen.