

Year C-Pentecost9-2019-Heroes of Faith

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By Thomas L. Truby

Hebrews 11:1-16

Heroes of Faith

Usually I begin with the Gospel and then work into the epistle if I can. This time I began with the Epistle.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for.” What do we hope for? Do we hope for peace, do we hope to be included, to live with purpose and meaning? I think so. We hope to be loved and cherished. The name of Toni Morrison’s best book, the one that won her the Pulitzer Prize for fiction was “Beloved.”

Coming from a slightly different angle, faith just knows that in the end “Love Wins,” to quote the title of Rob Bells book, and those living in faith move forward assuming that. Faith knows that the driving force underneath all reality is love even when the evidence for that is not obvious. These are things impossible to see but many of us have a deep conviction about them.

All of us want to feel approval beaming down like the sunshine in the corner of a child’s transparent drawing. Our ancestors received approval from God for having faith. As the writer of Hebrews says, “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.” You can’t prove any of this but you can know it by faith.

What if things, stuff, material, the world itself were made from a desire for relationship and that relationship was a relationship of love. What if the world was made of love; the big bang was an explosion of love, not power? What if the worlds were prepared by the word of God so that God has something to love, something to give himself to, to suffer for? All along it wasn’t “God said it and it was done,” an act of power. No, God prepared it because God wanted to love. How different is that?

I noticed the lectionary reading excludes verses 4 through 7 and I wondered what they contained. In them the writer of Hebrews gives three very different examples of people who lived by faith. They serve as models for his readers to emulate.

Verse 4 reads, “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.” What’s that about? Abel’s offering was a grain offering, vegetarian, no blood was shed. We usually think that killing an animal or a bird for the altar is o.k., that the ends justify the means, the ends

being placating God but as any innocent child will tell you, it still doesn't seem right. Abel offered a grain offering and that was all that was needed. Cain still believed in violence but by faith Abel didn't think violence necessary. Cain was right in seeing Abel's sacrifice as more acceptable to God but what does he do, he kills Abel, again resorting to violence. The verse ends with "God himself giving approval to his gifts, he died, but through his faith he still speaks." And what does Abel say? I think he says the shedding of blood isn't necessary to please God. God is already in love with us and to help us see that he allows us to shed his blood in Jesus the Christ.

By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and he was not found, because God had taken him." So who was Enoch? He was a great prophet who walked with God for 300 years and God was so pleased by that that he took him up into heaven avoiding death. That's the story. The writer of Hebrews then adds an interpretive statement. "Without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Now, nowhere here does it say that God throws out those who don't please him. That's not who God is. No, you just can't please God if you don't believe he exists because God can't have a relationship with you. And if he doesn't exist for you, you are not going to believe he rewards you. So look up to Enoch. He is your model.

"By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith." I think about the pressure the reacting environment is putting on the human species from every side when I read this. Our contemporary prophets are warning us of events as yet unseen but beginning to be seen while our leaders and many of us who won't have to live with the consequences, due to our age, are still in denial. If we were to address this issue we would have to work together as a species to build a rather expensive ark. Our actions would have the effect of condemning the world driven by power, rivalry and violence as it is who currently ignore the human species' mad movement toward ecological extinction. By condemning the logic of the world, Noah, "became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith."

Given the complexity of these verses, I can see why the lectionary compilers carefully walked around them. We are ready now for verse 8.

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out not knowing where he was going." I invite you to look back on your life. Do any of you find yourself where you expected to be? I don't. My life has been a strange adventure stretching from coast to coast. I have made choices that felt like Abraham leaving home not knowing where he was going. In terms of my faith I have traveled far and

returned to the place I began only this time with a faith that feels deeper and explains more of the world.

“By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who are heirs with him of the same promise.” Do you ever feel like an alien in a foreign land? I do. I can’t be comfortable here. I feel sick when I see what is happening to our world and our country. I think this is normal for people under the influence of God who leads us away from a culture built on greed, rivalry and violence. We don’t fit. But then nobody fits really for this is not living the way we were meant to live. Abraham didn’t fit either. “For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

All these heroes “died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” They knew the blessing was coming. They could feel it in their bones. They lived, rejoiced and suffered setbacks; times when almost nothing made sense but still they had this vision, this faith that animated them and pulled them toward a more promising future. “They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth” who saw things in ways far different than those around them. They hadn’t arrived at their homeland yet and were still seeking it but all along they knew their journeying would be worth it.

Speaking of Abraham and Sarah, “If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” I am not thinking of heaven in the escapist sense. No, for scripture the heavenly country is the country beyond rivalry, hatred and killing. It comes from beyond us and brings a love deeper than we have ever known; so deep it includes forgiveness for all and was planned for from the beginning.

Because Abraham and Sarah continued to live in faith, God was not ashamed to be called their God. Indeed, he has prepared a city for them. After all their waiting they finally get their city—a city in which they feel at home. Amen.