

ANCESTRAL FAITH

Hebrews 11:1-16
Genesis 15:1-6

New Store/Maysville Presbyterian Churches
August 7, 2022

When my kids were young I told them several times that as they hear Bible stories or when they read them for themselves that the same people will come up again and again. Stories about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Deborah and others. And while I didn't go into specifics of why these people and their stories recur throughout the Bible, the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* does.

A couple of things before addressing our verses for this morning. First, *The Letter to the Hebrews* is different in several ways from other Biblical writings – often called an exhortation, sometimes called an apology – it is a complete and carefully constructed rhetorical document that does not lend itself well to pulling apart sections and snippets for preaching, teaching, or proof-texting. Second, the historical content of this sermonic document is that of an unknown writer — yes, Paul has been cited the most often — but all we can deduce is that the true unknown writer is a leader in the Church, exhorting a community of faith, probably comprised of mostly Jewish-Christians, who themselves are being persecuted and shamed for their belief in Jesus Christ. This exhortation's overall purpose is to build up greater commitment and trust in staying the course of giving witness to the community's faith.

So you can see why the writer has drawn the illustrations of older Biblical heroes of faith to bolster this beloved congregation's own faith. If you took a moment to look at our verses this morning as they were read, you'd see that they are really a continuation of the writer's long list of Old Testament characters who, in the words of the author of *Hebrews*, "lived by faith."

How do we live by faith? For some, we might say, "Just going to bed and fully expecting to wake up in the morning is an act of faith." For others, we might say that getting in a car and driving to Lynchburg or as far as Richmond is an act of faith. For still others, living by faith is placing our whole trust in God to lead us where we need to go – even in those times and to those places which we would rather avoid.

The writer of *Hebrews* was clearly not with the community to whom he or she was writing. Yet, there are equally clear signs in the text that indicate that the writer intimately knew the folk to whom the document is addressed, and that the expectation was high that the people would respond favorably to what was being said.

As hard as it is sometimes to accept, hearing an outside voice allows us to listen more attentively. I know from working in the business world that we learned to pay attention to what consultants said about our operation, our customers, and our competition. And, if the consultant drew our attention to learning from the company's own past, then we tried that much harder to listen carefully.

The verses this morning from *Hebrews* lists people who lived by faith – that is to say, they placed their full trust and belief in God. As I said earlier, *Hebrews* is a very tightly-knit document and what is alluded to in our verses about what faith is is defined in the first verse of chapter 11: ***Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.***

Are we sure of what we hope for? Are we certain about what we do not see? And, more importantly, if we do, then how do we live so that others will see our faith?

I've said this before: Churches across the country which are growing spiritually are those that have a clear identity and purpose, and who have put together plans to make that identity and purpose visible to themselves, to the community in which they live, and to the world at large. These churches exhibit their faith in word and in deed. They look to their past to find seeds for the future.

What was done in the past that could work now? Who led the children and the youth ministries when we remember “the golden years?” What has changed? How can we adapt? What work is God calling us to do here, now, and in the foreseeable future? How can we exhibit the Kin-dom of God so that our actions will draw others to have faith?

The writer of *Hebrews* lists ancestral heroes of faith in the appeal both to remember the past and more importantly to draw strength for the future. As Tom Wright puts it: “Faith’ here is not a general religious attitude to life. It’s not simply believing difficult or impossible things for the sake of it, as though simple credulity was itself a virtue. The faith in question...is the faith which hears and believes the promise of God, the assured word from the world’s creator that [God] is also the world’s redeemer...”

Who are the heroes of New Store/Maysville Presbyterian Church who heard and believed the promises of God?

{Get interactive — call for names of folks}

Are they merely people of history now? And, are you willing to step out in faith as they did – working for justice in the community, starting new Christian education opportunities, leading mission trips, or seeking new ways to share the faith we have in God and Christ Jesus?

We remember those ancestors in the faith not simply because they may have done extraordinary acts. Sometimes heroes are ordinary people doing ordinary things in the course of their lives. But, what they did or how they did those acts are inspiration for us to live our lives in remarkable ways.

Today, we pause to reflect on and remember those who have been influential in our own faith journeys. It may have been a Biblical character like Abraham or Sarah or Deborah or a prophet, or it could be a family member, a parent or grandparent, or a Sunday School teacher or pastor from our youth. Any or all of these folk demonstrated their ancestral faith in a way that fueled ours. Will we do the same?

Looking ahead to the climax of this piece on faith, we find that the focus of such faith is Jesus the Christ, “the author and [completer] of our faith.” Again, how then shall all of us live? Shall it be as one who distrusts, discounts, dismisses God at work in others, through others, and for others? Or, shall we live by faith, in faith, through faith, and for faith in God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Our heroes point the way to and through ancestral faith. Will we follow?

Let us pray: Holy and ever-loving God, we praise You for Your work in and through ancestral heroes of faith. We listen to their stories, of how You did mighty things through these men and women, and we are inspired. Yet, we don't see too many heroes these days, and our lives are too wrapped up in living in the present. We do not see into the future and are reluctant to learn from the past. By Your power in and through the Holy Spirit, lift the veil from our eyes. Help us to draw strength from those teachers from our past and to envision our continuing their work into the future – building up Your kingdom, serving Your people, glorifying Your name in word and in deed; all this done in and through the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen