

“Living By Faith”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
August 11, 2019

**Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16**

What is faith? How do we live by faith? Is faith measured by what we do, or why we do things? How does faith guide and influence us amid life’s challenges?

Perhaps you are interviewing for a new job. You’ve worked hard on your resume. You’ve prepared for the interviews. You’ve had good conversations with your prospective employer. You’ve bounced ideas and processed things with friends and family. You’ve done everything you can do. All you can do next is wait. And it’s in the waiting that faith enters. Are you left second-guessing yourself, doubting if you did the best job possible? Or are you at peace, knowing you were true to yourself, and in that peace, you have faith in God’s presence through it all?

Perhaps you have just walked the road of illness with a loved one, and now, upon death, you are traveling the journey of grief. When someone we love dies, we come face-to-face with our own mortality. The rubber-meets-the-road of our faith in the resurrection: do we really trust and believe the Easter story, or do we hesitate and wonder what comes next? How we face death brings faith into a stark reality. We can honestly express our doubts while holding on to the crux of our faith in the resurrection. Or we can run and hide from our faith because we believe God has deserted us in our greatest time of need.

Perhaps life has been going along pretty well – your family is healthy, your job is good, and your outlook on life is positive. Then there’s a pain that won’t go away. And a doctor’s visit leads to a scan. And the scan leads to the discovery of a mass. And the mass leads to a diagnosis of cancer and surgery. All within a matter of weeks. Now what role does faith play in life? Is it the cause of all your problems, so you turn away and blame God for your misfortune? Is it the source of your strength to get through whatever comes next, even if that’s no guarantee for the future? How does faith guide us amid life’s ever-increasing challenges?

Those are just three of many kinds of circumstances we may find ourselves in where faith takes center stage. We can go through stretches in our lives when our faith is not tested. But it’s in those moments of challenge and struggle that we wrestle and must ask ourselves what faith really is - to us, for us. What do we believe? Why do we believe? How does our belief shape who we are and what we do?

In a very real sense, faith is rooted in hope. Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian minister, whose books touched me deeply while I was in seminary. He speaks to pastors on preaching on hope, and in doing so he speaks to all of us. He writes:

*If preachers decide to preach about hope, let them preach out of what they themselves hope for.*

*They hope that the words of their sermons may bring some measure of understanding and wholeness to the hearts of the people who hear them and to their own hearts. They hope that the public prayers they pray may be heard and answered, and they hope the same for the private prayers of their congregations.*

*They hope that the somewhat moth-eaten hymns, the somewhat less than [generous] offerings, the somewhat self-conscious exchange of the peace may all be somehow acceptable in the sight of the One in whose name they are offered. They hope that the sacrament of bread and wine may be more than just a perfunctory exercise.*

*They hope that all those who come to church faithfully week after week may find at least as much to feed their spirits there as they would find staying at home with a good book or getting out into the fresh air for some exercise. At the heart of all their hoping is the hope that God whom all the shouting is about really exists.*

*And at the heart of the heart is Christ - the hope that he really is what for years they have been saying he is. That he really conquered sin and death. That in him and through him we also stand a chance of conquering them ([http://www.pulpit.org/articles/preaching\\_on\\_hope.asp](http://www.pulpit.org/articles/preaching_on_hope.asp)).*

The writer of Hebrews gives us a glimpse of this faithful hope in the eleventh chapter of his letter. For him, faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” To have faith in something you cannot see is difficult, since we would prefer to hold stock in something right before our eyes. But as Hebrews reminds us, Abraham and Sarah had nothing in front of them to believe in, only God’s vision to them of what their life would be like if they trusted God. And in three actions, Abraham showed faith in God: by taking his family from his homeland to a foreign place; by staying in this promised land; and by believing that he would one day have children of his own through Sarah, his wife.

Fred Craddock, in his commentary on Hebrews in the New Interpreter’s Bible, writes: *Hebrews 11 provides the raw material for drawing a profile of faith as it has characterized the people of God throughout salvation history. Faith is not simply belief that there is a God but trust that God “rewards those who seek him” (verse 6). Faith has a long memory and profits from the experiences of our forebears. Faith also hopes (v.1), looking beyond the immediate to God’s future (vv. 10, 13, 26, 35, 40). Faith is tenacious and enduring, able to accept promises deferred in the conviction that death itself does not annul*

*God's promises. Faith is not coerced; believers always have the option of returning to "the land that they had left behind" (v.25). Faith is subjective, to be sure, a conviction firmly held (v.1); but it is not solely subjective, since it is the substance, the essence, the very being of things hoped for (v.1)* (Fred Craddock, *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 12*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, © 1998: 146).

While faith is measured by our current living, it also reflects our belief in God's future. And as the writer of Hebrews tells us, "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them." All the saints who have preceded us could not see what the "city of God" would be like, but they had faith that it existed, and thus they believed. They believed in God, and trusted that God would provide throughout their life. Some might call it "blind faith," but in truth, it was really a faith that could see everything.

Scot McKnight writes: *A theme arises to the surface with power in Hebrews 11, namely, faith as fidelity or allegiance to God. Faith in chapter 11 is about life expressing faith, a whole life and not just the simple act of volitional trust in Christ. The author does not focus so much on Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6, but on the various acts of faith in and allegiance to God throughout his life. These moments illustrate the theme of this chapter that faith is an act of trust that leads to a life of trust* (*Connections, Year C, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2019: 226).

*Faith is an act of trust that leads to a life of trust.*

Here at John Knox, how do our acts of faith lead to lives of faith? When we come to Saturday, August 24, the date of our community picnic, will we decide at the last minute we can't make it? Or will we come to the picnic and meet our guests, welcome our neighbors, get to know their names, and invite them back? Will we act in faith, thus leading to lives of faith?

When we are encouraged to invite a friend to church next month, how will we respond in faith? Will we let it get lost in the shuffle of everything that consumes our calendars, and expect the next person to follow through? Or will we intentionally talk to someone we know well, and ask them to come on September 15 with us to John Knox? Will we act in faith, thus leading to lives of faith?

When we baptize Jeffrey Flynn and his father, Hayden, in the second worship service this morning, you will be asked the following question: "Do you, as disciples of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture Hayden and Jeffrey, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful disciple?" When we answer that question in the affirmative, will we then follow through on our promise - with teaching, mentoring, care, love, and friendship? Will we act in faith, thus leading to lives of faith?

How can we sincerely hope for a new future if we are not willing to faithfully choose now to follow God? How can we preach and pray for new life, new disciples, and new ministries, if we aren't willing to freely open ourselves to the Spirit of God? How can we live in hope if we live in fear? How can we live in faith if we don't faithfully live?

But you know what? Those are the easy tests of faith. The tough tests of faith are the ones that make us ponder God's existence at all. When our children suffer from disease, or addiction, or poor decisions, how does our faith assure us that God will provide? When we watch our spouse, our parent, our friend wither away in front of us because of Alzheimer's or Parkinson's or cancer, how does our faith assure us that God will provide? When a colleague, a fellow member of the church, a stranger who has wronged us comes and asks for forgiveness, how does our faith assure us that God will provide? The real tests of faith are not the ones that challenge us how much to give, how to spend our time, or which direction to take. The real tests are the ones that show everyone what we are made of - deep, deep down.

My hope for you - for each of you - is that you will believe with your whole being that God lives in each of you, because of the faith that has been placed in your hearts. The assurance of my faith is that God will use our acts of faith each and every day to create lives of faith which spread God's good news throughout this world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.