

Sermon Series: A Summons to Faith, Hope, and Love
Sermon I: "Faith: The Conviction of Things Not Seen"
Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-10; I Corinthians 13:10-13
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
April 13, 2008

"And now abideth faith..." I Corinthians 13:13

This 13th Chapter of I Corinthians is almost as familiar to us as the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. Each time I hear it, I resonate once more with the creative imagery with which it begins: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but have not love I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Most of us can recite from memory the elegant, forthright conclusion: "And so, and now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love." In the face of the impermanence of so much that surrounds us, amidst the inhumanity, the violence and meaninglessness of our times, what actually does endure? What are the values that are substantial enough to build a life, a home, a family, one's human destiny upon? (1) Paul says there are three foundation stones to the life that pleases God and brings genuine, deep-down happiness. If you have these three things, your life will not necessarily be easy, but it will be a whole life that will hold you up, will hold your community up, will hold your family up.

Faith, hope, and love.

In an article this week in the *New Yorker* magazine, Michael Kinsley writes about the baby boom generation in America. He says that according to conventional wisdom of the last several decades, baby boomers are thought to have found happiness in material possessions. We all remember the famous bumper sticker from the late 1980s that read "He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins". But Kinsley goes on to ask, "Is there anything in the Hammacher Schlemmer catalog which you would give up [even] a year of your life for? Of course not." (2) Materialism is no foundation for a life that matters.

I remember reading, years ago, the plot of a play by Eugene Ionesco entitled *The Tenant*. The curtain opens; the stage is bare. A man stands alone on the stage. There's a knock on the door. Two men enter carrying a sofa; then, they leave the stage and come back with a set of matching chairs. Then they go out and return with a chest of drawers, rugs, lamps, and so on. Eventually, the stage is

absolutely filled with stuff. One of the movers says to the tenant, "Is there anything else?"

The tenant answers, "No. I guess not." The lights fade. The curtains close. There is nothing else if your life is all filled up with things.

Jesus once spoke of the wise man who built his house upon a rock. "The rains fell; the floods came; the wind blew and beat on that house," but because it was founded upon a rock, it stood. Faith, hope, and love are the foundation stones of a life that can withstand catastrophe. Today, and for two additional Sundays after Earth Day, next week, we will think together about the meaning of these three indispensable words in the Christian vocabulary.

We begin today with faith, which the writer of Hebrews defines as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." He does not linger long, this writer, with these apt but abstract definitions. (3) He moves immediately into action. Eighteen sentences follow that begin with the words "by faith":

"By faith, we understand" how God put the world together.

"By faith, Abel offered to God an acceptable sacrifice."

"By faith, Noah, warned by God of events yet unseen, respected the warning and built the ark,"

"By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called out to a place he was to receive as an inheritance."

On and on, the stories flow from memory's store and on to the page. What is faith? It is our response to the steadfast love of God, our response to the faithfulness of God. Faith is less about reciting a creed than it is acting on the good we trust to be true. Faith is "an inward assurance" that results in some sort of "outward manifestation." (4) Faith is when you can look back on a period in your life and you say, "I never believed I would have made it though that," and there you are, still standing, or up and standing again.

In recent days, our nation has remembered Martin Luther King Jr. on the 40th anniversary of his death. In this wonderful book by Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community*, which I have been re-reading, I am reminded about how it was in sanctuaries all across the south, African-American men and women of faith, gathered for worship and sang from the core of their very being, *O deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome someday*. That's the inward assurance part. The sitting down at the segregated lunch counters, the marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, those were the outward manifestation parts. (5) Faith is less about piety and more about getting your insides together and getting out there and doing what needs to be done. I like this definition: Faith is a living, reckless confidence that the sovereign love of God will hold up.

For some reason, as I was writing this sermon, I thought of three fellows I haven't thought of in years – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I know you think about them all the time! I went back to the third chapter of Daniel, and there the three of them are, saying - *No, no, Nebuchadnezzar, we're going to be loyal to our God, to Yahweh, not to any golden statues, not to any kings or other gods. God alone is our Lord.* So King Nebuchadnezzar heated the furnace up to seven times what it usually was. One of the men says, *We think God's going to save us, but we don't know. Whatever happens, either we're burned to a crisp, or we're all right; in either case, we're not going to bow down to any other god.* You remember how when King Nebuchadnezzar looked at the furnace, there weren't just three fellows walking around in the fire, but four! And the fourth, the King said, "had the appearance of a god."

Have you ever walked through the fire? And felt as if, as bad as it is, there was someone there right here, right beside you? Double dependability: God is always dependable, and when we allow ourselves to rely on God's dependability, that's where faith begins and ends, and there is no stronger force on earth than that.

I think of Jesus, our role model in life, the primary example of faithful endurance to the end. Hebrews calls him "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith". Listen to these words, "...who for the joy – joy – that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame." Joy and suffering and shame, all mixed up together. Because he endured, "he has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

The faithful way is not always easy, but it is the best way to live and to die. Some of you are no doubt familiar with the incredible story of the explorer Ernest Shackleton and his crew of 27 who set sail for Antarctica on a ship called Endurance just days before the outbreak of World War I. They were going to walk where no human being had ever walked before in Antarctica. They had come to within 85 miles of their destination, when the Endurance became trapped in the ice. For 22 months, they were lost. And for them, life was almost beyond endurance. There were two near fatal attempts at escape but they failed. And then, at last, the final rescue. But after that second escape attempt, there were a number of sailors on an island of ice called Elephant Island. Shackleton had gone on to see if he could get help and bring it back. Every morning, a man named Green would rise before daylight. He would make his way through the gray dawn to the galley, where he lit the blubber stove and began preparing a breakfast of seal meat for the men. Then, a man named Wild would get everybody up and out. He would yell, "Lash up and stow! The Boss might come today!" Day after day, when the men heard the order and were reminded of the possibility, they pushed back their fears. They pushed back their miseries; by faith, they survived another day of bitter cold on an island of ice. (6)

"Lash up and stow! The Boss might come today!" To be a faithful person is to expect that almighty God, boss of the universe, in the sense of the power of

vulnerable love, almighty God will have the last word in any situation. No, it might not happen, that last word, in your lifetime. Or it might happen this very day. You don't know. You trust that "though the earth should change and though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, the Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge."

In 1983, the World Council of Churches met in Vancouver. A South African theologian presented this declaration to the assembled Christians from around the world:

"It is not true that this world and its people are doomed to die and be lost **This is true:** 'that God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.'"

"It is not true that we must accept inhumanity, hunger, and poverty as inevitable. **This is true:** 'I have come so they might have life and have it abundantly.'"

"It is not true that we have to wait for those who are especially gifted to be prophets of the church before we can do anything. **This is true:** 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; your young shall see visions, and your old shall have dreams.'" (7) We are sons and daughters of the God who endures, the God who gives us the vision toward which we move. Every time we push through the threshold of fear, we step into the future that God has prepared, and that future breaks forth in the here and now.

I hope our visitors this morning will forgive me, but I am about as excited over the issuance of that building permit I mentioned a minute ago as I was over the birth of our two children. Since the fourth of January, we have waited and hoped and prayed everyday, but nothing! We have lashed and stewed! But the construction crews did not appear. If there was news, it was usually bad news, the most recent being that someone in the 1950s from the City had come out and decided that we have what is technically called blue water running across the front lawn. That took about six or eight weeks to get settled. Everyday, I had the vision in my head. Every day I could see a welcoming entrance for people with bad knees and low-functioning lungs. Everyday I could see a parking lot without potholes; I could see a mom with twins in a stroller and a toddler by the hand, finding it easy as pie to get all around everywhere here. I could see how in the beginning, like Abraham and Sarah, we had set out in response to a call from God, and how we had no idea when we began, where we would get the money to get the job done. But it turned out that all the while, the God who had called us out was right here with us all the way, through the fires of impatience and the deep waters of disappointment, God has been here. You never know when you set out how things are going to turn out, but when you trust God, when you look to Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, you are never sorry. You are never, ever sorry.

With all I have had to say about faith this morning, I want to say a closing word about one of the great aspects of this congregation. It is that we take seriously the verse in I Corinthians that reads “For now we see through a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.” Or as the King James reads, “For now we see through a glass darkly...”

Around here, we live and act in faith, even as we acknowledge that we are mere mortals who can never know fully the mind or will of God. We act in faith, though doubt and uncertainty can sometime nip at our heels. We acknowledge that as the Apostle Paul taught us, faith is not a work, faith is not a matter of human will, faith is a spiritual gift. And for reasons known only to God, some of us get faith in great big doses and others of us have to get through life with a tiny little communion cup of faith. We are in process. We acknowledge, as writer John Updike has said, that “belief, like love, must be voluntary.” We acknowledge that much of the evil perpetuated through the history of the world has been done in the name of God by people convinced that they were doing the will of God. Religious fanaticism burned people at the stake in the 16th century, and religious fanaticism sent airplanes crashing into office buildings full of people on the 11th of September in the year 2001.

The alternative to religious zeal that burns up other people is humility, spiritual humility. Our times cry out for churches that are willing to have genuine conversations about matters of life and faith. We are desperate as a society for communities of faith that are receptive to fresh insights into ancient truths, insights that are themselves gifts of the spirit. I believe that we are Christian, not primarily because of our ideas, or our arguments in defense of God. I believe that we are Christians because we act like Christians, are true to the way of Christ because we trust God with ultimate truth and we paddle our own little boats with the twin oars of hope and love. I believe that when life throws us deep, God is there to catch us every time.

(1) J. Barrie Davies, *Aspects of Love*, Upper Room Books, 1995, p.119.

(2) April 7, 2008.

(3) Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, John Knox Press, 1997, p. 113.

(4) Ibid.

(5) As suggested by Long. Marsh tells the story in detail.

(6) Allan Boesak

(7) Caroline Alexander, *Endurance*, Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1998, p.174.