

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Vocabulary of Our Faith: Faith
The Rev. Joanne Blair
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Genesis 15:1-8; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

As we continue our series on “The Vocabulary of our Faith” – looking at the words we use regarding our faith and what they mean – it only makes sense that we look at the word “faith” itself. What does faith mean?

Needless to say, I “googled it.” Faith is:

Belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence (American Heritage Dictionary)

Belief that is not based on proof (Random House Webster’s Dictionary)

Trust, belief (Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms)

The common denominator here is that faith is believing in, or believing that, something is true without concrete evidence. According to these definitions, there must be some room for hesitancy or questions – otherwise it would be defined as “knowledge” instead of “belief.”

Abraham is the epitome of someone with questions, while still trusting and believing. Earlier in Genesis we learn that God told Abraham to leave his country, his people, and his father’s household to go to a land God would show him. And based on the promises of land, descendants and blessing, he went. How many of us would leave just everything behind – everything that is familiar to us – and just go without knowing how things would unfold, or at least knowing the destination? The concept of family meant everything to a person living in the time of Abraham, and it was very unusual for family members to live hundreds of miles apart from each other. But by faith, Abraham went.

Abraham’s faith was certainly tested, especially later regarding the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. We can only guess at how Abraham really felt about this command. While we know that God holds him back from the sacrifice, the point is that Abraham’s faith in God was stronger than his love for his son.

We also learn from scripture that Abraham was not without sin and failure, but that God held fast to God’s promises. Abraham’s life teaches us what it is to have relationship with God. Abraham shows us not only what it is to have faith, but what it is to live faithfully. He believed in God without any concrete evidence that God’s promise would come to fulfillment. And this is what the writer of Hebrews is attesting to in his letter. Written to a church in Rome, the writer is concerned that they are drifting away from their faith. While not being persecuted at the time (though they would be later), Christians were unpopular, and the writer is concerned that they will not hold fast, and that many will return to Judaism. The book of Hebrews begins with the statement that God, who in ancient times revealed Godself through the prophets, has in these last days revealed Godself through the life and teachings of a Son.

Leaning on the faith of Abraham (and many other ancestors), the author encourages them (and us) to remain strong in faith. We are told that faith does actually provide substance and reality, giving us a ground to stand upon. Not only that, but faith provides the courage to move forward into the unknown. But again, what is faith? In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg (based on Niebuhr’s work) writes that faith has four primary meanings in the history of Christianity. Faith as Assensus (Assent – assenting to the truth of a claim or a set of claims; believing that a statement or a set of statements is true. This really took off during the Reformation and the Enlightenment, as believers started to write new creeds and doctrines or dissect older ones. Faith as Fiducia (Trust) – having a radical trust in God. Soren Kierkegaard gives the metaphor that faith is like floating in seventy thousand fathoms of water. If you struggle, if you tense up and thrash about, you will eventually sink. But if you relax and trust, you will float. (Ring a bell to any New

Testament stories?) Faith as Fidelitas (Faithfulness) – a radical centering in God. Being faithful to a relationship. Not to doctrines and creeds, but to the God to whom they point. Not faithfulness to statements about God, but faithfulness to God. Faith as Visio (a way of seeing) – a way of seeing the whole; of seeing what is. Faith, as a set of eyes through which we see the world. Seeing the world as spoken of by Jesus. For how we see the world affects how we respond to it.

The first meaning of faith, Assent, is primarily a matter of the head. The remaining three: Trust, Faithfulness and Way of Seeing, are primarily matters of the heart. Someone once told me, “I love worshiping here because I don’t need to leave my intelligence at the door.” I couldn’t agree more. It is important, crucial even, to use our critical thinking skills. Faith certainly involves the head. But perhaps more importantly, faith involves the heart.

Faith is taking God at God’s word. Faith is trusting that the promises of God have been, or will be, fulfilled. Faith can include doubting, and questioning, and arguing and challenging God, but in the end, trusting and following God. Faith is not something we can put on a shelf and dust off each Sunday to bring to worship. Faith is not a thing we simply attain. It is not enough to say, “I have faith” and expect God to do the rest. Faith leads to action. Faith is something we live out as faithful people. Faith is filled with momentum, leading where God calls us into the known and the unknown.

Faith is being faithful. It is a matter of aligning our lives with the purposes of God and living in relationship with God involving both our hearts and our heads. And this relationship leads to transformation. Again, faith is taking God at God’s word, and living our lives in active, grateful response. Faith is traveling into the unknown with the trust that God’s promises have been, or will be, fulfilled.

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and looked out as he gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. There certainly wasn’t any concrete evidence for the end of racial segregation. But his dream of a just and integrated America was not based on fact. It was based on faith. His faith in God’s transformative power was, to him and many others, the assurance of the things they hoped for. He stepped forward in faith, because he was called and he believed God’s promises of justice and righteousness. Being faithful, he traveled into the unknown.

We tell faith stories of Martin Luther King Jr. much the way the writer of Hebrews tells the story of Abraham. The hope of heaven is not separate from the hope of a transformed earth. Neither King, nor Abraham, nor the other ancestors mentioned in Hebrews saw the promise of their call fulfilled in their lifetime. They only saw it off on the horizon. Yet by their faithfulness, they continued to move forward into the unknown. They held fast to the promises of God, knowing that the future belongs to God, while also knowing that faith calls us to action.

Abraham’s faith wasn’t a blind faith. His faith was based on the promise of, and trust in, the God who had already proved to be faithful and true. Abraham didn’t live to see the full fruition of the promises, but he remained obedient and faithful. And this is the message in our scripture from Hebrews today. This message is as timely today as when it was written.

And if we ever find ourselves doubting or waning in our faith as the church in the book of Hebrews was, we need only look at the promises fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our faith need never be a blind faith. Our faith should be based on the promise of, trust in, and relationship with our Lord and Savior who has already proved to be faithful and true. The constant call of scripture is to live our lives on the basis that God is both good and steadfast and Jesus exemplifies this.

Our faith is to be expressed in trust, love, obedience and action. The more we express our faith in active faithfulness, the more our theology will expand while the simpler and more childlike our faith will become. What a beautiful thing.

And so, our challenge this week is to ask ourselves:
Do I trust the promises of God? How am I putting my faith into action?