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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost  
August 12, 2007

**Hebrews 11.1-3,8-16**  
Luke 12.32-40

### **By Faith—Part I**

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* –Hebrews 11.1

This Sunday and next, we're going to focus on a couple of passages from the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. Though Hebrews isn't always the most accessible of biblical books, these chapters provide a familiar and stirring discussion of the meaning of faith.

The first verse of the chapter is one of the most well-known of biblical sayings about faith: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11.1) I've always had sort of an ambivalent feeling about this verse. On the one hand, it seems to contain something deep and true. On the other hand, it has always seemed to me a bit glib and incomplete. Indeed, faith *is* the assurance of things hoped for, but isn't it *more* than that? I've always worried that this verse leads us to a kind of Christianity that is romanticized and complacent, endorsing what is usually called "pie in the sky" theology: "by and by, pie in the sky, when I die."

For our two weeks in August, I resolved to come to the passage with an open mind. One of the things I began to realize, with the help of some astute commentators, was that this passage does not present itself as offering a *complete* definition of faith. In these chapters, the author of the letter is much more in the preaching mode than in the teaching mode. As one scholar puts it, "Instead of providing a complex definition, the Preacher simply names those aspects of faith he hopes to encourage. He does not need a three-masted doctrinal schooner with all the sails and rigging; he needs a landing craft to get his congregation onto the beachhead that lies on the far horizon."<sup>1</sup>

As a preacher, the author of this letter is trying highlight and encourage one or two specific things. One of the things I've learned in twenty-plus years of ministry is that you can't do everything on a single Sunday. I don't know if my sermons have gotten better, but over time they have gotten shorter and simpler. It just isn't possible to develop a well-rounded theology from the pulpit each Sunday. Over time, one hopes a well-rounded theology will come into view. But on any given week, the preacher must pick a point or two for clear emphasis. One of the preaching professors at Yale used to say it this way, "Every good sermon teeters on the brink of heresy." That is, every truly moving sermon is going to emphasize one part of the faith message at the expense of some other parts. In theological terms, that comes close to heresy. In practical terms, that gives people something to take home and work on in the coming week.

Anyway, that's the kind of thing the author is up to in this chapter of Hebrews. He's not teaching about the definition of faith, but rather cheerleading for the implementation of faith in everyday life. And, as sermons go, it is a fantastic one.

First he starts out with an elegant and lean statement of what faith is all about: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11.1) Though there are many things about faith that this operational definition does not state, it still contains a lot. Sure it talks about "things hoped for" and "things not seen," but this is not "pie in the sky" theology. For while faith's object exists as something not yet present, faith gives us some benefits immediately, in the here and now: assurance and conviction.

The world is a scary place. You don't have to watch the news for very long to learn that many things that you *think* you should be able to take for granted cannot, *in fact*, be taken for granted at all: the safety of your children at school, the expectation that terrorists will be apprehended, the truthfulness of politicians, the economic balance and stability that benefits all nations. No, a brief scan of Google news tells you, in no uncertain terms, that everything is up for grabs.

To live in such a world, we need the by-products of Christian faith that are outlined in Hebrews. We need the assurance that something—*someone*—is watching over the big picture. We need the conviction that, however much the sands of history might shift and roll,

somewhere there exists a solid bedrock to the universe. To his congregation (and to us), the Preacher of Hebrews offers just such assurances.

But the faith promoted in Hebrews is not a complacent faith. The message is not, “Okay. Everything will be fine. Just quit whining, relax and wait.” The author introduces a small phrase which he carries through the next couple of chapters. This small phrase makes all the difference. Just two words: “By faith...”

“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.” (Hebrews 11.8) Repeating the small phrase, by faith, over and over again, the letter parades before us a vast array of biblical heroes. We are told of the courageous and unusual things these people did. Why did they do them? How did they do them? A simple answer: by faith.

- By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice...
- By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac.
- By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months...

The Preacher of Hebrews really gets on a rhetorical roll after ticking off these examples: “And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. (11.32-28)

The message is clear. If our faith means anything, it must have an impact on the way we live our lives. Our faith doesn't immediately change the dismal forecast of the latest “breaking news” e-mail from CNN. Our faith doesn't instantly make all human relationships pain and trouble-free. No, our faith gives us *hope* that these things will change someday. In the

meantime, it gives us assurance and conviction. Those attributes—present with us now—can change the entire quality of our lives.

By one reckoning, many of the heroes of the Old Testament were failures who never accomplished their goals, who never reached the Promised Land. And yet, on the way there, in the course of their journey, their lives were enriched with a meaning and purpose that eclipsed the very goal itself. The letter sums this up beautifully:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

—Hebrews 11.13-14

Like Abraham and Sarah, like Moses and other characters of the Bible, we too are people “seeking a homeland.” The journey is long, and often hard. But on the course of the journey we come into relationship with One who gives us assurance and conviction. In so traveling, we change not just our location, but also ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, Interpretation Commentary. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), page 113.