

Defining Faith  
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 & Genesis 15:1-6  
August 7, 2022  
First Presbyterian, Luling

I still remember our first quiz in our first theology class in seminary. It only had one question, and the question was, "What is John Calvin's definition of faith?" We had been memorizing that thing for the better part of a week, and 25ish years later, I still remember it. "Faith is the firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts by the Holy Spirit."

Good old Calvin. Never use one word when five would do just as well. "Faith is a firm and certain knowledge." That's good, it's not a wavering, wimpy thing. "Of God's benevolence toward us." God intends good for us. "Founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ." The promise is not dependent on us. This is grace. "Revealed to our minds." Faith is something our minds can grasp. "And sealed upon our hearts." Faith is sealed in our hearts, in the very deepest part of us. "By the Holy Spirit." Here it is the Holy Spirit's role to make faith real to us.

Our reading from Hebrews has a different definition of faith. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen." In The Message, it's paraphrased, "The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see." Or as the old King James Version read, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Defining faith is difficult. I'm not sure what I would say if someone said, "what is faith?" It's a combination of belief and trust and relationship and persistence and perseverance and a whole lot of other words. I'm doing no better than Calvin or the author of Hebrews. There is this sentence of introduction, and then he gives up and just gives examples of faithful people. These examples go on for the entire chapter and include many of the Old Testament figures that we are familiar with. The part of the chapter that we read focuses on Abraham and Sarah as examples of faithful people, people who trusted in God's promises even when they seemed absurdly out of the realm of possibility.

Which all leads me to three things I want to say about faith. First, we don't have faith as an abstract kind of thing. I don't think it's accurate to say someone has faith and end the sentence. Because we have faith in someone, we trust in someone, we are in relationship with someone. And that someone is God. We have faith in God, we don't just have faith as if it is a possession or something we own or just a fuzzy idea we have. Faith has to have an object, and that object is God.

Abraham had faith in God, trusted in God, even when what God was promising seemed ridiculous. Sarah went so far as to laugh at God's promise. When would you laugh at someone's promise? When you are very secure in the relationship between you, when you have a firm and certain knowledge of mutual trust. Abraham and Sarah did not have faith in

themselves, because alone they were incapable of fulfilling the promise. But they had faith in God, trusted in God, were in a relationship with God.

Which leads me to the second thing. Faith isn't something we can work our way towards or study our way towards or pay for or barter for or in any way obtain for ourselves. I know there are people who will tell you that if you read your Bible and pray every day, that you will get faith. And there is absolutely nothing wrong, with reading your Bible every day and praying every day. But it's not what gets us faith.

There are also people who tell you that you will get faith if you feed the hungry and work against oppression and visit those who are in prison. Nothing is wrong with any of that, either. But it's not what gets us faith.

And here I am going to be very, very Presbyterian, and I believe this deeply, hold to it deeply, cling to it deeply because it is a blessing.

Faith does not come from anything we do. Faith comes from God. Faith is a gift. No matter how we define faith, no matter if we get just the right words or don't really know what we're talking about, no matter if we do or don't do a particular action or action, we can neither obtain faith nor get rid of it. Our faith in God comes from God. That's what Calvin meant when he said that it is "founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ." Our faith in God is a gift of grace.

Abraham didn't do anything to receive faith. He was minding his own business, back in Genesis 12, when God told him to go. And Abram and Sarai went. They received God's promises for descendants, and a land, and a nation, but those promises were not immediately fulfilled. They had faith in God, and they went. God gave them the ability to trust and the willingness to lean on the promises, even when they seemed ridiculously impossible.

Faith is a gift. It's not based on how close to God we feel, but on how close God already is. It's not balanced on how faithful we act, but on how faithful God is.

And the third thing I want to say is about defining faith. It's obviously difficult, as generations of theologians as well as the writer of Hebrews have shown us. I'm beginning to think that defining faith isn't something we humans can ever do successfully. But the reverse is certainly something true. Faith in God defines us. Faith in God shows in our lives, in our words, in our actions, in how we think about things, in the decisions that we make. Faith in God should affect the things we buy, the places we go and how we get there, the people we vote for, the issues we get exercised about. Faith in God defines us as Christian people.

Faith in God and in God's promises defined Abraham's and Sarah's lives. Faith defined their lives as people who followed when and where God led them, as people who trusted in God's threefold promise, as people who were the father and mother of God's people.

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