

Hebrews 11:1-16

We Know By Faith

Last week the text came from Hosea 11. It is one of the grand passages in the bible that rises above the fray and gives a clearer view of the bible's message. I never can do it justice. It is a poem about the inner struggle in the life of God between the moral demand on the one hand, and the value of relationships on the other. It is written from the divine perspective but it reveals human discoveries about God. There is great emotion in it. God is arguing with himself about Israel and how he has loved them and cared for them and about how they have continued to turn away from him. There is anger. He says that swords will flash in their cities and destroy the bars of their gates which is a way of saying they will get what they have coming. Then there is a turning from within:

How can I give you up Ephraim
How can I turn you over
My heart is changed within me
All my compassion is aroused
I will not carry out my fierce anger
Nor turn and devastate Ephraim
For I am God, and not human
The Holy One among you
I will not come in wrath

I am not good at dramatic emotion but this text requires it if it is to be understood. I am always disappointed when I finish speaking about it because it feels like I have let it down.

The Roll Call of Faith

Today's text is similar in that it is also one of the great biblical passages. I hope to do it justice. The first 16 verses of Hebrews 11 comprises the beginning of what has come to be known as the "roll call of faith." The unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews uses narrative prose rather than poetry like Hosea does but nonetheless reaches the heights in an attempt to convey the richness and beauty of the gospel and of the meaning of faith. In the part that we have read today, which is only the beginning of the "roll call," he mentions Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. The message is about their faith, which was the motivating factor in all their actions.

"Faith is being sure of what can't be seen, the assurance of what is hoped for," he tells his readers. And then the historical review is made. As it goes on mention is made of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. And then, "What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, who:

conquered kingdoms, administered justice, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames, escaped the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength, who became powerful in battle, women received back their dead. Others were tortured, faced jeers and floggings, were chained and in prison, were stoned and sawn in two, they went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, mistreated. The world was not worthy of them."

It is quite impressive to read.

The Intellectual Problem

There are two great problems for faith in all times, but certainly in our time. The first I will call the "intellectual problem." It is raised by Enlightenment era scientific advances which is more than just that advancements in knowledge and technology have forced people, believers, to admit that whatever it is that we mean when we say that the bible is true, we don't mean that the ancient state of knowledge is required belief. The earth is not flat. It is not young. Monarchy is not a divinely inspired form of government nor are animal sacrifices a required form of worship. It is more profoundly that know about empirical data and through it are unable to prove the biblical claims about God using scientific means. There is no physical evidence that is unambiguous, one way or the other. Sometimes

we speak as if we think the people who wrote the bible weren't very smart or that they were superstitious or at least grossly uninformed. The more I study the bible, the more I find these ideas to be untrue.

I am confronted in this text with someone who writes as if they are a part of the modern era and are familiar with our state of knowledge and who answered both of the great challenges to our faith. The intellectual objection is destroyed in one sentence,

"By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."

This statement anticipates the modern conundrum. Is there an unseen reality out of which proceeds the material universe? The answer is yes, of course, but precisely *because* it is unseen, we can't use scientific method to investigate it. We know by faith. The author of this text has made a very informed statement as if he had read Kant and Locke and Hume and all the other Enlightenment philosophers and as if he was fully aware and up-to-date about science and the modern advancements in knowledge. But of course he couldn't have been. There is no superstition or lack of intellectual curiosity here. This statement is the product of sober reflection, so much that I am forced to conclude that the whole intellectual objection to

religious faith in our time is not a very powerful objection. It is easily dispensed.

We know that everything that can be seen, seen through a microscope or a telescope, sensed with a sensor or a probe; anything that has molecular structure, physical properties, chemical formula, material substance, *has been made* by what cannot be seen. It has been made by what can't be seen through a microscope or a telescope or sensed with a sensor or a probe of some kind, by that which has no molecular structure, physical properties, chemical formula, or material substance. God is not a human being. God is not a created thing. How do we know? By faith. God is not a question science can answer and in case there happens to be any scientists who believe that science has proved there is no God, they would do well to stop using science to make theological claims in the same way theologians should stop using the bible to make scientific conclusions.

The Problem of Evil

But the problem of evil, of pain and suffering, is a more difficult one to answer. It arises from the universal experience of trouble, and from the conviction that God is good and powerful. This apparent contradiction is at the heart of the bible's questioning. The decline and eventual destruction of Israel as a nation, which came

at a high price in terms of violence, combined with the unjust execution of Jesus by Pilate forces us to look evil straight in the eye without flinching and to ask for an explanation. These are the stories of the bible. This question of evil and suffering *is* what the bible is about. More than anything else, the bible is an answer to the problem. It is the central question life. Actually, I believe that modern atheism and skepticism does not come from the intellectual objection at all, though some speak as though it does, but it comes from the objection raised by the fact of pain and suffering.

The author of this letter answers this "objection" with the "roll call" litany of biblical biographies. The great parents of our faith were, in fact, human beings who suffered like we do, or perhaps it is better to say that we suffer like they did. his presentation is explosive.

"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on the earth. People who say such things say that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

What more needs to be said? We follow their steps because we too are homesick for a better life, a better world. Our pain and suffering does not separate us from God, but connects to those who have come before us.

When we try to cling to this life we distort it and become caricatures of what human beings are meant to be. When we try to live without faith, we become embittered, and life becomes a despair.

But when we choose to believe, no matter how religious we become or how religious the language is that we use to describe it, we embark on a journey that leads us home, on which in countless ways we meet Christ.

And anxiety vanishes like a mist thinning out, and sanity comes without explanation. There is no more anger, there is no more selfishness. We grow up mature and sober, and responsible and at the same time replete with joy and peace, as we look forward to our heavenly home.

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