

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 The Substance of Things
August 11, 2019 Hoped For

I love this passage from the Letter to the Hebrews. It is one of my favorites; the roll call of faith. In it we learn one of life's important lessons, that much of what is most precious is invisible, it can't be seen, *must be believed*. Thus, faith is a central feature of human experience. There is this gem of a statement;

“It is by faith that we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was *not* made out of what is visible.”

By this statement science is put in its place because it declares that science is helpless before the grand question of God. The bible, in its purpose of helping people understand about God, tells stories. Consequently, one begins a relationship with God that turns out to be very much like a journey, sometimes called a pilgrimage.

The biggest part of Hebrews 11 is a summary of the pilgrimages that make up much of the biblical story. Abel, Enoch, and Noah, and the ones we have read about today, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, their descendants were all on a spiritual journey, “searching for a better country, a heavenly one,” a country that can not be seen though they were convinced of its reality.

So we are led to a second statement which I also love, but not because it answers my questions, rather

because it is challenging; “And all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw and welcomed them from a distance.”

The Better Country

What is the nature of the better world they sought? Are we not on the same journey? We could frame the vision of the better country in personal terms. When we look at our personal lives; the joys and the sorrows, the triumphs and the tragedies, the ups and the downs of things, we can make some positive statements about our hope.

We hope for a world without cancer and other diseases; a world of some balance and equity, where people do not live in fear of the next crisis; where families will not be torn apart by addiction or disagreements over things that secondary; and where everyone will be able to have a healthy self-esteem, grounded in God's grace, with love and understanding all around. We dream of promises kept, of people valuing people more than things and money. It is hard to imagine, but we hope for it.

Or it can be framed in terms of group dynamics, the larger picture. We hope for a world without racism, that ugly stain upon us all, and sexism. At long last, human beings will learn how to value one another, and treat each other in a dignified way; a world without poverty, or violence or war; a world without injustice.

A frustrating feature of contemporary life, even among Christians, is that when one makes a statement about such things, as one is often inclined to do, and when a clear statement has been made condemning racism and sexism and things like that, almost everyone agrees in principle, not everyone, but most. Yet what they think of when they hear these critiques and affirmations varies from the thoughts of some their neighbors.

People are led by these disparate visions into different camps, opposing one another, calling each other names, learning to doubt the authenticity of one another's faith. Divisions, factions, party spirit, these are words found in scripture on a list of sins.

There is much that can be said, but for today let it be enough that the better world calls us to leave home behind, strangers and aliens though we are, and search for and work for something better.

God's Promise

Some, would say we are foolish to think such a world can be achieved by human beings here on Earth. I would agree with that criticism except that I don't think it means we should *abandon* attempts to make ourselves and our world better. To abandon such efforts means we have given up hope, stopped believing; stopped preparing for heaven.

We should never give up hope, not in each other, or in others with whom it seems we hopelessly disagree,

because the foundation of our hope is God's promise. It is okay to remember that these great saints in Hebrews 11 are *not* known because they achieved the better world they sought. They are known because they refuse to stop searching for it, believing in it. "They all died without having received the promises," could destroy hope, or it could establish it. It must be such an establishment.

Isaiah

We have heard from Isaiah this morning, who also found himself in a decaying society, one about to be or maybe even just had been, destroyed. He harshly criticizes the religion of his people and claims God will not hear their cries for help while they still have blood on their hands; and then he says,

"Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.
Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow."

Then there is a great promise of Redemption;

"Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool."

It is the end of Isaiah's vision that is helpful for us today. It comes from the 65th chapter, and it speaks of the promised better world;

“See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.
“Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
the one who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere child;
the one who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.
They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
No longer will they build houses and others live in
them, or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the work of their hands.
They will not labor in vain,
nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune;

for they will be a people blessed by the Lord,
they and their descendants with them.
Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
and dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,”
says the Lord.

Strangely Triumphant

There is a sense of triumph in the 11th chapter of Hebrews that doesn't depend upon any of the ways we measure success, but on faith, which is described as its substance, in the KJV anyway, its assurance. That is what believing in Jesus is all about. When you accepted Christ you committed yourself to the journey in search of a homeland like the one promised in Isaiah. Remember that the world Isaiah inherited fell apart, but his hope was not destroyed.

It is not clear that our world will fall apart the way his did; Both on a personal level and in the world, life can get better as we await the coming day, as we lead lives worthy of its promise.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)