

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-12 - Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. <sup>2</sup> This is what the ancients were commended for....<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.<sup>9</sup> By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.<sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.<sup>11</sup> By faith Abraham, even though he was past age -- and Sarah herself was barren -- was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.<sup>12</sup> And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

Dear Christians Trusting Firmly in Jesus:

We all have physical challenges of one kind or another. But I sometimes wonder how challenging it must be to be totally blind. If I were blind and tried to walk from here back to the ushers on my own, I would be in big trouble. However, if one of you came up here and led me by the hand, that wouldn't be so scary. I would trust you to be my *reliable guide*.

Hebrews 11 talks about faith. Faith allows us to move forward confidently even though we can't always see where we're going. We can do this because we are being led by our absolutely *Reliable Guide*.

On this final celebration Sunday of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation, we will talk about one more "sola": **Faith Alone**. (1) *Faith clings to Jesus alone* (2) *Faith moves Jesus' people to action*.

1

Hebrews 11 is often called the "Hall of Faith" chapter of the Bible. It describes faith and points us back to OT believers, heroes of faith, and encourages us to take our cue from them. These men and women lived in a troublesome world and yet they continued to put their trust in God. God says we can do the same as we make our way through the dark and scary swamp of the sinful world we live in. The Lord says, "***Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. <sup>2</sup> This is what the ancients were commended for....***" Faith brings the future into the present; what I'm waiting for is already mine. As a bumper sticker I once saw said about God's promises, "**God said it. I believe it. That settles it!**" Did you know that when we say the word "Amen," we are saying exactly that? "*Yes, it will be so. It will happen just as God said!*"

Our promised eternally bright future, of course, all depends on Jesus. Our forefather Abraham lived 4,000 years ago. He believed just as we do -- except his faith was not in the Savior who *did* come, but in the Savior who *would* come. However, the *object* of our faith and Abraham's faith is the same: **Jesus**.

Abraham didn't know Jesus' name, but he believed a Messiah would come. "***By faith Abraham, even though he was past age -- and Sarah herself was barren -- was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. <sup>12</sup> And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.***" From Abraham & Sarah's miraculous child, Isaac, many descendants would be born. And one of those descendants would be an even more miraculous Child: Jesus.

Faith in Jesus as Savior, however, is not just a piece of information or knowledge. Lots of people know who Jesus is but don't believe in him as their Savior from sin. By God's grace, God the Holy Spirit comes to us in our ignorance and spiritual darkness, calls us, reaches out and takes us by the hand to guide us to Jesus. The Spirit comes to us through his Word and through Baptism, opens our eyes to see and trust in Jesus, and thereby removes the obstacles of sin and hatred that separate us from God.

Now we have faith's 20/20 vision: ***"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."*** Faith implants in us a homing instinct for heaven to be with Jesus that doesn't allow us to roost here on earth. We're always thinking, *"I'm but a stranger here, heaven is my home."* Or, as one of our senior citizen members said to me recently, *"I just can't wait to see Jesus!"* That's what our souls say since the day of our Baptisms.

2

Faith grasps Jesus and holds on...and it also moves us into action. ***"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise."*** Faith moved Abraham to up and leave home and journey to a place God would show him. It says he ***"obeyed and went..."*** This was an enormous "leap of faith" for Abraham -- but he made the leap because he knew where he would land: safely in God's hands today on earth and safely in God's hands tomorrow in heaven.

We say, ***"Sola fide"***--"Faith alone," but in reality faith is never alone. Yes, we are saved through faith in Christ *alone*, but true faith always produces offspring. Faith has many children. Martin Luther put it this way, ***"The true, living faith that the Holy Spirit instills into the heart simply cannot be idle."*** Faith is always actively producing fruit. The fruits it produces are called good works.

This is what James talks about in his NT letter. Faith grasps Jesus, but then it springs into action. James writes, ***"What good is it if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?.... Faith, by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."*** In other words, God can see if we have faith in our hearts, but the world can't see into our hearts; it sees our faith by our deeds.

***"Abraham obeyed..."*** our text says. If this Bible verse were written about you and me, would it say the same? ***"\_\_\_\_\_ (insert your name) obeyed."*** For example, Jesus gave us his Great Commission: ***"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them..."*** (Mt.28). Are we obeying Christ's commission? People who quit attending worship and think there's no problem often forget to answer that question: ***"Am I obeying the Lord like Abraham obeyed?"*** If I'm not worshipping, if I'm not supporting the gospel outreach efforts of my congregation, if I'm not supporting my synod's missionaries and teachers, if I'm not volunteering my time and talents to help my church in any way -- am I being an Abraham who ***"obeyed and went?"*** We can **all** do the Abraham test. That's why God holds out this piece of Scripture before us today. God wants us to learn from and be more like these men and women of faith in Hebrews 11. He wants us to move away from our selfish, stingy, stubborn tendencies and joyfully ***"obey and go"*** with the message of Christ to a world that desperately needs it.

Not only is this "Faith Alone" weekend; and it's also the beginning of **Epiphany**. Epiphany reminds us that the message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone belongs in the ears of all people. God help us to be Abrahams & Sarahs and Jesus' disciples and go.

***Faith Alone:*** Faith clings to Christ alone. Faith moves Jesus' people into loving action. To God the faith-maker alone be the glory!

Amen.