

Twelfth Sunday of Pentecost
August 19/22, 2004
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-10

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Faith Is the Essential Characteristic of a Christian

1. By faith we know who we are
2. By faith we know why we're here
3. By faith we know where we're going

^{NIV} Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.² This is what the ancients were commended for.³ 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...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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Fellow Christians,

What is it that enables you to say that you are a Christian? Is it that you dutifully roll out of bed and go to church on Sunday morning? Is it perhaps that you pray regularly? Or might your ability to identify yourself as a Christian be based on your love for other people? You've heard the song lyrics that say, "They will know we are Christians by our love." But that's a reference to how *other people* will know that we are Christians. My question was, "What is it that enables you to identify yourself as a Christian?" The answer is not church attendance or prayer or even love; the answer is faith. St. Paul told the Galatians, "**The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.**" (Gal. 5:6b) And here in Hebrews 11, the author asserts, "**And without faith it is impossible to please God.**" (11:6a) The Bible consistently teaches that we are saved through faith. It's through faith in Jesus that we can identify ourselves as Christians.

But what is faith? Here in Hebrews 11 we have the Bible's definition of faith: **"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."** That sounds at first like two consecutive contradictions. If you're hoping for something, how can you be sure of it? And if you can't see something, how can you be certain of it? To a great many people, the answer is, "You can't. Seeing is believing." But we Christians are sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Our certainty comes from our faith in what God has told us in his Word. The Bible says Jesus is God's Son. It says that he laid down his life to redeem a world of sinners. The Bible says that Jesus, who died, rose from his tomb on the third day. It says that Jesus alone is the way to the Father and that Jesus is coming again to take his believers to heaven. We haven't seen any of these things with our eyes, but we're sure about them and certain of them by faith. Understand, now, that saving faith isn't just a matter of knowing the facts of Bible history. Faith is personal trust, it's confidence or certainty, that Jesus, God's Son, is *my* Savior, the one who lived and died as *my* Substitute and who rose bodily from the dead. Anyone who has such faith, the Bible says, is saved. And anyone who does not believe will be condemned. That's how essential faith is. And, as Hebrews 11 tells us, faith, this essential characteristic of a Christian, enables us to know other things as well. 1] By faith we know who we are. 2] By faith we know why we're here. And 3] by faith we know where we're going.

1. By faith we know who we are

Do you know who Stephen Hawking is? He's a physicist and a professor at the University of Cambridge in England. For many years he's suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease which has virtually paralyzed him. He can speak only with the assistance of machines. Yet he's world-renowned for his brilliant mind. But this brilliant man once said this: "We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special." Let me ask you: How does that make you feel about who you are and your place in the universe? An accident, right? And an unimportant one at that! Your existence is a cosmic fluke, according to Mr. Hawking. Now Hawking did say that our understanding of the universe makes us something very special, but just a few weeks ago, Mr. Hawking had to admit that his understanding of the universe had some holes in it, you might say. For thirty years Hawking had been insisting that the black holes in the universe are so dense that any information drawn into those black holes would cease to exist. But at a conference in Ireland recently, Hawking confessed that his understanding of the universe had been

wrong. He now believes that black holes cannot destroy the information about the objects they swallow. It makes you wonder how special this supposedly advanced breed of monkeys really is.

But there is a reliable source from which to gain the most basic understanding of our universe. It's here in Hebrews 11:3—"*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.*" No accident there. The Bible asserts here that the universe of space and time came into being by a special act of divine creation. God decided to create this universe and then applied his limitless wisdom and power to the creative task. But he needed no schematics or supplies. He just spoke and it came to be. And what goes along with this is the understanding that the rest of what God reveals in his Word about Creation is also reliable: that God made Adam and Eve in his own image, that they were to rule over every living creature, and that God established marriage, home, and family when he created Eve and brought her to Adam. As Isaiah said, "**Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.**" (64:8) And what the Bible reveals about this Creator/creature relationship that we have with God is reason for joy and hope. It says in the Psalms, "**As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.**" (103:13-14) Through faith in Jesus we know that we are not only divinely created objects of God's genius, but also the objects of his mercy and compassion. I find that far more comforting than thinking that we are an advanced breed of monkey, don't you?

Hebrews 11, as much as anything, is a kind of walk through a gallery of portraits of various heroes of faith. As we continue here, we're going to visit one particular portrait in this gallery, the portrait of Abraham, the man of faith and the father of all believers. We'll see that with a faith like Abraham's, we also know why we're here.

2. By faith we know why we're here

It says here, "*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.*" The reference here is to Genesis 12 near the beginning of the story of Abraham, where it says, "**The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'**" (12:1) The LORD then made a seven-part promise to Abraham and after that the next thing we read is, "**So Abram left...**" (12:4) I guess they can

do that to you in the Army—tell you to get up and go and not tell you exactly where you're going. And I suppose the Assignment Committee of the WELS does something like that with our teacher and pastor candidates. But this was 2000 BC. This was an age completely lacking in the marvels of modern transportation and a time when a person's tribe and clan were all important. But God said "Go" and Abraham went. He obeyed. In fact, Abraham's life was characterized by such obedience of faith. In Genesis 17 God announces the covenant of circumcision and in response Abraham "on that very day" took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household "and circumcised them, as God told him." And then there's Genesis 22. There the LORD says to Abraham, "**Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering...**" How, as a father, do you cope with such a command? Yet the Bible says that "early the next morning" Abraham saddled his donkey and took two of his servants and his son, Isaac, and set out for the region of Moriah.

Can you imagine what a person without faith would have said to these commands? *Leave home? It's a dangerous world out there and, besides, you haven't told me where you want me to go. Or Circumcision? I can't for the life of me see how that's relevant. And Human sacrifice? That's what you're asking of me? I don't think this is God's voice I'm hearing.* But faith made a difference. In each case, faith led to obedience. Abraham came to see that he was here on this earth not simply to live life by his own lights, but to serve the LORD and follow his will. And in his life of serving God, he was sustained by God's promises.

What if God, this week, conducted a review of his people and came up to you and said, "What are you doing here?" How would you answer? Unfortunately, there are too many people who wouldn't be able muster much of an answer. A fair-sized segment of the world lives by the frat boy mentality: I'm just here to have fun. Another good-sized segment makes the mistake that King Solomon in last week's Old Testament lesson told us he made. They engage in toilsome labor under the sun, piling up possessions and accomplishments, but gradually come to the despair-inducing realization that their work doesn't love them back and they're going to have to leave all they've amassed to the one who comes after them. And then there's the portion of the population that has no clue what they're doing here—they've never thought deeply about it.

But by faith we know why we're here. We know that we're here to serve God. For however long he gives us life and breath, we're his to command. Through all the changing scenes of life our only question is, "How do I glorify him best right now?" That doesn't mean we all have to quit what we're doing and lock ourselves in a church. We can glorify God with our work, with our family life, with our recreation, and, yes, through our involvement in the ministry of our church, but glorifying God is what this life is all about. It's about expressing our faith in obedience to our compassionate Creator/Redeemer God and living to his glory. *"Take my moments and my days, Let them flow in ceaseless praise."*

Abraham obeyed and went, the Bible says. He went to the land of Canaan, the land God promised to him and his descendants. But Abraham also knew that by faith he was headed for an even better country.

3. By faith we know where we're going

It says here, *"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. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."* Some of us spent part of this summer sleeping in tents. And most of us, I'd guess, were only too happy to get back home to nice, solid homes and our comfortable beds. Abraham, by contrast, lived in a tent his whole life. This tent-life was a constant reminder that he hadn't yet received even a corner of Canaan to call his own. When it came time to bury his beloved wife, Sarah, Abraham had to buy the cave at Machpelah to have title to a resting place for her. And as he entered negotiations with the owner of the field, he confessed, **"I am an alien and a stranger among you."** (Gen. 23:4) But rather than cause for bitterness or disappointment with God, this nomad's life was fine with Abraham, because he knew where he was going. He was going to the promised land—not the one that lies between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River—but the one in heaven, the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith we have that same confidence. *Earth is a desert drear, heaven is my home.* With the apostle Paul we confess, **"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ..."** (Php. 3:20)

Do you see, then, how essential faith is in the life of a Christian? First and foremost, by faith we trust that Jesus has rescued us from sin and death and given us heaven. We know who we are and why we're here

and where we're going. But maybe you're thinking, *But I'm not Abraham. I tend to forget whom God has made me. I lose track too often of why I'm here. And, I confess, I lose sight of where I'm going.* If you're thinking that way, then I want you to realize that Abraham wasn't a self-made believer. His faith wasn't his accomplishment; it was God's gift. Abraham's faith got its start with God's promises and his faith was sustained and strengthened as he heard and remembered God's promises. It works the same way with us. **"Faith comes from hearing the message,"** the Bible says, **"and the message is heard through the word of Christ."** (Rom. 10:17) Do you want a stronger faith, a faith like Abraham's? Then do what the author of Hebrews encourages in the next chapter: **"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."** (12:2) With his promises of love and his pledge of forgiveness, Jesus will increase our faith so that we can live in the sureness and certainty that he intended. Amen.