

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost • August 8, 2010

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Hebrews 11:1-16

"By Faith: Faith That Guides"

After hearing last week's message, which used paper books and e-books as an example of what's new in the world, a number of people came up to me and shared their experience with both of these types of books. But when it comes down to it, books are books. They contain words, pictures, and formulas. Now, it's been some time since I've been in a class on the theory of writing, though I did work at a Barnes and Noble store for a while. Books – or more precisely, the contents of a book – fall into one of two categories: fiction or nonfiction. Fiction goes on one side of the store, nonfiction on the other. Yes, there are subcategories, like "mystery" and "historical romance" or "photography" and "religion;" however, let's focus on those two top categories. In the realm of fiction, the writer evokes what could be – or what might have been – engaging the imagination of the reader to create a world apart from that which we see. Sometimes a writer might choose to use a reality quite similar to our own, familiar to the normal human experience, with a few key changes that fundamentally alter it. Nonfiction writing, though, communicates what was and what is. It reflects what the author has observed in the world. It might even theorize about the future, but nonfiction is still grounded in things that can be seen or perceived.

Over the centuries, both fiction and nonfiction works have shaped the lives of readers. Some people will spend time in a novel – be it written by Mark Twain, Stephenie Meyer, or J.K. Rowling – and grow so attached to a character that the story influences the reader's choices in life. Others have read a book of philosophy and then decided to adopt that philosophy as their own. It doesn't matter if you're talking about fiction or nonfiction; writers seek to impress something on their readers, to communicate a message or an idea that sticks with their audience.

Today, we take a look at a new writing, the letter to the Hebrews. We don't know very much about the origin of this book of the Bible, not even its author. Unlike the other two epistles we've studied this summer, Galatians and Colossians, Hebrews probably wasn't written by St. Paul. And it's not so much of a letter to a group of Christians in a particular area; indeed, it's more of a message of encouragement, almost like a sermon to the Jewish Christians who are scattered throughout the Roman Empire. The author of Hebrews is writing to build up those believers who are considering going back into Judaism because they have faced difficulty as Christians. Throughout this letter, the writer keeps bringing home the point that the practices of the Jewish faith are no longer necessary. While people once observed those rites in order to be made right with God, that old system was just a pale imitation of what has come to the world through Jesus. There's nothing there in Judaism to which these Christians could return. Summed up, the message of Hebrews is this: **How can people ever come near to God? Through Christ, by faith.** And for the next few weeks, we will look at the core of that message in these closing chapters of Hebrews through our final sermon series of the summer, "By Faith." But what is faith?

Is faith just a set of concepts and ideas? Or is faith located in the practices that someone observes? Here in Hebrews, we hear that faith is more than either those, and even more than both put together. Listen again to the first few verses of Hebrews 11: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. "That which we believe" is indeed part of faith. But faith is also "that which believes."* Faith is that which allows us to take possession of God's promised gifts. It is the mailbox that enables us to receive what Jesus has delivered, the antenna that makes it possible to hear the good news of the gospel.

Here's an illustration that I use to describe faith in some of our courses here at St. John's: Imagine that you've got an electrical circuit – think back to those diagrams that you might have seen in science class, with a few lines making a rectangle. If you look on the top side of the circuit, there's God, the power source. On the opposite side, you or me. In order for electricity to flow through the circuit, the circuit needs to be completed: we need to be connected to God on both sides, as it were. But if there's a break in the circuit, like a blown fuse, the power doesn't get to where it's supposed to go. That blown fuse? That's a result of our sin. Sin cuts us off from God. And since we're cut off, we don't have any power to do what we're meant to do. And since we don't have any power, we can't do anything to fix the problem. But God can and does do something to fix the broken circuit: **He gives faith.** Through the work of the Holy Spirit through His Word, through Holy Baptism, God comes and installs faith in us. Faith completes the circuit, and through it, we are reconnected with God.

Here in Hebrews 11, the author uses a different illustration to show what faith does. Writing to Jewish Christians, he points back to the big names of the Old Testament, the people that God called thousands of years ago. Abram, later called Abraham, lived by faith, and that faith guided his life. Following God's promise that God would give him a land for his descendants, he went, childless, to a far-off territory that he did not know. His wife Sarah gave birth to a son, even though that seemed impossible. Abraham and Sarah both died without ever receiving the real fulfillment of God's promise of a land and a great nation, and yet, through faith, they knew God to be faithful and that He would keep His promise, even if they would not see it happen with their own eyes.

Faith looks ahead. Faith gives the certainty that God will do as He has promised, looking beyond the things of this life. Like Abraham and others that have gone before us in the faith, we don't experience the fulfillment of what we're looking towards – not in this life. Here, we see loved ones die too soon. We see hardships and disasters. We see a world that's very much about the here-and-now. But faith isn't limited to the here-and-now. The author of Hebrews shows how people in years past had come near to God through faith, but he also points us, along with those early Jewish Christians, to the guarantee of God's promise: Jesus. In Jesus' life, death, and victory over death, we and the Hebrews have something greater than the Jewish rites could offer: forgiveness and hope which cannot be dimmed by that which can be seen. **Faith can look ahead because faith looks back to the cross.** Faith sees, though from afar, the fulfillment of God's promise on that day when Jesus comes again.

God gives us faith that looks ahead in Christ to guide our lives. It shapes us and provides a foundation for living. A few weeks ago at the National Youth Gathering, our group got to go out on a tour to see the areas that had been flooded out in Hurricane Katrina when the levees broke. While there were a few homes which had not seen any repairs performed, many more new homes were being built on cleared-off lots. We saw a couple of construction sites where crews were driving 30-foot-tall wooden piles into the ground. Our guide explained that these piles would support the foundation of the building, connecting it to the solid bedrock so that it did not rest on the unstable soil of what was once a swamp. Once in place, the piles poke up from the ground all over, providing support for the entire building's footprint. Any part of the building that isn't supported by that deep foundation might start to deteriorate, sinking into the ground and breaking off from the rest of the house. The work of faith in our lives is much the same. We're not meant to have faith over here, in one part of life, and school, work, recreation, and relationships off in other parts. The faith that God gives is the foundation that is there to support and guide the entirety of the believer's life. Through faith, the Holy Spirit holds all those parts of life in His care, keeping them from sinking into the ground, keeping them from falling down.

As we study Hebrews, may the Spirit guide you as experience something unique – nonfiction which is not limited to what can be seen or perceived with the eyes, but is known **by faith.**

Amen.