

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the seventeenth Chapter of the First Book of Moses, called Genesis.ⁱⁱ

“And when Abram [**ABE-rumm**] was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram [**ABE-rumm**], and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram [**ABE-rumm**] fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram [**ABE-rumm**], but thy name shall be Abraham [**ABE-ruh-hamm**]; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan [**KAY-nunn**], for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good report. Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear. By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his

gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh. By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith. By faith Abraham [**ABE-ruh-hamm**], when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good report.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

There are some things that are easy to recognize but hard to define. An artist, for example, recognizes beauty when he sees it but has a hard time defining it. A poet can describe how it feels to be in love but cannot really define what love is. A physicist can tell you a lot about matter and how it behaves under various conditions, but apart from analyzing its composition cannot actually say what it is. So we of the cloth can point to examples of faith and can tell you some the things that produce it, but we find a definition to be difficult.

The writer of Hebrews offers this definition: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” That’s probably about as good as anyone can do.

The English word “substance” comes from the Latin “sub”, which means “underneath”, and “stance”, which means how you stand or the position that you take. Literally the word means “standing underneath” and it is the exact equivalent of the Greek word that it translates. So faith is that which stands underneath and supports our hopes. It is the foundation that undergirds the Christian hope for ourselves and for the world.

The word “evidence” is commonly used in a trial or a scientific investigation. It is something that indicates what has happened in the past. “By faith,” says the writer, “we understand that worlds were framed by the word of God and not by things that we can see.”

So faith points both forward and backward in time. It helps us to understand where we came from and where we are going. We came from God and we are going to God. We have a history, and we have a future, both of which are grounded in faith. So ultimately it is faith that gives our lives meaning and purpose and significance.

Now before I go on, let me explain that I do not believe the Epistle to the Hebrews was written by St. Paul. There are several reasons for that, not the least of which is that Paul begins all of his letters by identifying himself. This writer does not do that. He never tells us who he is. That is why I keep calling him “the author” or “the writer”.

It appears that this writer, whoever he may be, is well schooled in Greek philosophy, especially Plato. That is probably why he feels compelled to offer a definition. But like a good Jew he quickly turns to historical narrative.

In a series of vignettes about well known figures from the Old Testament, he cites faith as the reason these people were able to achieve what all of us hope for --- the approval of God. “Without faith,” he says, “it is impossible to please [God].”

The chapter reads like a roster of heroic figures from the Old Testament Hall of Fame. When we read it, we might well imagine ourselves walking down a long corridor with portraits along the wall of men and women who are famous for the success they had in their spiritual lives.

There is Abraham, who was a rich man and a prominent person in his hometown. There is Joseph, a boy sold as a slave by his brothers but who worked his way up to a very high position in the Egyptian court. There is Joshua, a soldier hardened by years of wandering in the desert. The list even includes a shrewd, cunning, and ambitious man named Jacob. There is a portrait of Sampson, a strong and belligerent street fighter, and of Isaac, a gentle and unassuming if somewhat gullible family man.

This is a diverse group of people with very different personalities. They lived in different times under different circumstances and had to contend with different challenges and problems. Their accomplishments range from simply raising a family in the case of Isaac to establishing a kingdom in the case of David.

But they all have this in common: All of these people were able through faith to overcome the challenges and problems they faced. And they also had this in common: They “obtained a good report.”

The Greek word that is translated as “a good report” in the King James Version actually means “a witness” or “a testimony”. In the present context it means that they received divine approval, which is

how the Revised Standard Version translates it. A good report in the Day of Judgment is what all of us hope for. We usually call it “justification” or “salvation”. The thing to remember is that faith is what undergirds that hope. It is “the substance of things hoped for.” It is also what unites us to in our time to the heroes of the Bible in their time.

There are many names we could add to the list of those who have lived by faith and, through that faith, have obtained salvation. We could add the names of the Apostles and those whom we call by the title “Saint”. We could add the names of people we have known personally and people still living that serve as role models and inspirations to us even now. But the name that really needs to be added to the list is your name – the name given to you when you were baptized – the name by which you were called when you stood before the bishop to confess and be confirmed in your faith. That is the name by which you are prayed for in the Church, and the name by which you will be called when you stand before the judgment seat of God. That is the name that needs to be on the list of those who, through faith, have received God’s approval.

As “the evidence of things not seen”, faith involves certain assumptions about life and about the world and about ourselves. But those assumptions alone do not constitute faith. It is when you act on the basis of those assumptions that faith comes into play.

“The just shall live by faith,” says St. Paul, quoting the prophet Habakkuk. If you say you believe in God, but you pay no attention to him as you go about your business, you do not have faith. All you have is belief, and belief does not save you. “Faith without works,” as St. James reminds us, “is dead.”

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. ... By it the men of old received a good report”.

You too will receive “a good report” if your hope is undergirded by faith, but only if your faith is a lively faith that makes itself evident in the way you live each day. Let us pray for such faith:

“O almighty God, who hast called us to faith in thee, and hast compassed us about with so great a cloud of witnesses; Grant that we, encouraged by the good examples of the saints, may persevere in running the race that is set before us, until at length, through thy mercy, we may, with them, attain to thine eternal joy; through him who is the author and finisher of our faith, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*”

—oo0oo—

St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
Charlottesville, Virginia
July 24, 2011

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxviii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Genesis 17:1-8 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Hebrews 11:1-16 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Hebrews 11:1-2 (KJV).*