

In his unmistakable style, Frederick Beuchner writes about Abraham and Sarah’s faith in his book, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC’s of Faith*. “God tells Abraham, age 100, and Sarah, age 90, that they will have a baby. Both laugh. God tells them to name their son “Isaac,” which in Hebrew means ‘laughter.’ Why did the two old crocks laugh? They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman with one foot in the grave was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true, they would really have something to laugh about, and in the meantime, it helped them keep going.” (Buechner, p. 109)

The word “faith” conjures up so many images. Western culture often seems to think of faith as belief that has no objective basis. One of the Merriam Webster Dictionary definitions of faith is “a firm belief in something for which there is no proof.” From that perspective, a person might have faith that Saturn is made of blue cheese or that it will snow in the northern hemisphere tomorrow. Christians, on the other hand, will often link faith to things like *confidence* and *assurance*, as Hebrews 11:1 does.

In the Heidelberg Catechism, we Reformed Christians profess that “faith is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance that...I too have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.” Similarly, when this Scripture passage refers to “faith,” the writer seems to speak of something far more than just belief. Speaking of “faith” in the context of the book of Hebrews is what the writer calls a “word of exhortation” (13:22) for a Christian community that he never specifically identifies. Therefore, faith is much more than merely an intellectual exercise and the anonymity of this

letter's recipients gives Hebrews a kind of "timeless" quality that allows each of its readers to participate in its story by the work of the Holy Spirit.

How we talk is reflective of where we come from and which generation we belong to. Last Monday Jayne went to Philadelphia to teach a mini music camp, as she calls it, to preschoolers at our sons' church. While we were exchanging text messages, she told me that enrollment was up to 23 kids. I thought I would reply to her good news by saying "wonderful" but that sounded a little too Lawrence Welk. So instead, I sent a reply saying "neat." At least that sounded a little more Beatles, closer to my generation!

Tom Long describes something of where the writer of this book is coming from when he says: "Hebrews bears all the marks of an early Christian sermon, what the author calls a 'word of exhortation' (13:22), a sermon of the sort surely preached in many of the first Christian congregations. Early Christian sermons were heavily influenced by preaching done in the synagogue. Hebrews appears to be an example of a sermon that is rabbinical in design and Christian in content" (*Hebrews*, p. 2 Presbyterian Publishing). And the book of Hebrews relies on Hebrew symbolism, mentioning people like Moses and Melchizedek, as well as concepts like the sabbath, high priests and tabernacles. Yet Hebrews' central message is clear: Jesus Christ shows us far more about WHO GOD IS than other religions or practices. It insists that Moses and Melchizedek, the sabbath, high priests and the tabernacle ALL POINT TO JESUS.

Chapter 11's key themes include both "faith" and "commendation." In fact, this chapter begins (v. 2) and ends (v. 39) by mentioning "commendation" for one's faith. When this book talks about faithful people, it pays the most attention to Abraham. Hebrews' inspired author mentions three actions of Abraham that demonstrate his commendable faith: **First**, verse 8 speaks of God's call to Abraham to leave his Mesopotamian home to which he immediately and obediently responds. Without cell phone navigation he starts out for a place that God has promised to give him as an inheritance, even though he doesn't know exactly where that is.

So basically, Abraham leaves his settled and secure life for a life that seems unsettled and insecure. I have often wondered just why he was willing to do that. **Second**, verses 9-10 describe Abraham's time in Canaan. Living with his family there, they have no citizenship status. Today some might call them "migrants" or "illegals." It is there that Abraham's family lives in tents, not in buildings that have solid foundations. Abraham doesn't just leave home for the land of promise without a title to any land. He also lives in the land as someone who has no ownership claim on it. The faith that equips him to do that is what the writer of this chapter wants us to see.

Third, verses 11-12 describe Abraham's faith in God's promise to give him numerous descendants. He lived in Canaan for nearly twenty-five years without fathering a child by his wife Sarah. Yet Abraham continued to have faith that God would give him a child. In spite of their infertility, he believed God would grant them the son they needed to claim his family's permanent home in this land of promise.

What sort of faith would stubbornly cling to God's promises in the face of such apparently insurmountable odds? In verse 1 of Hebrews 11 the author tells us that "*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*" While that verse is a familiar description of faith to some of us, its precise meaning is a bit unclear. We're just not sure to what exactly the Greek words *hupostasis* and *elegxos* refer.

Of course, the NIV translates those words as "confidence" and "assurance," today's sermon title. Yet their meaning seems to be richer. *Hupostasis* refers to the objective "reality" of our faith. *Elegxos*, refers to the "proof" about things we don't yet see. Yet it doesn't seem like Hebrews' author equates faith with that reality. As Robert Gagnon suggests, the writer of Hebrews appears to say that faith believes that ultimate *reality* lies not in what we can hear and see right now. Instead, faith is confident that what is real is what we *can't* see or hear because it hasn't happened yet. That makes faith a fairly radical thing, at

least, in our Western culture. We believe that *only* things we can see, hear, touch or smell are real. If you can't measure or test it, it can't be real.

Hebrews comes along and claims that what is really real is what you *can't* see, hear, touch, smell or measure in the present. Faith believes that, for example, God exists, even though we can't see God. Faith believes that God "rewards" those who faithfully seek him, even when we haven't yet seen that reward. Faith believes that God somehow formed the universe, even though no one was around to record that event. That should help us followers of Jesus' begin to understand why Abraham was able to do such remarkable things. He left his home in Ur because he had faith that God had a *better* home in store for him. Abraham could faithfully live in Canaan, even though he had no permanent home there, because he trusted God would someday give his descendants a permanent home there.

Besides that, Abraham could stay with his childless wife because he believed that God would give them the descendants God had promised. Abraham could even take steps to sacrifice Isaac because he believed God would somehow raise his son. Such faith recognizes that what God promises us is *far better*, more real, than anything we see, hear, smell, touch, measure or even imagine (See v. 16). Still, we Christians recognize that we can never produce such faith on our own. All the Christian apologetics in the world won't by themselves convince us of God's trustworthiness. Neither we nor those we love will be sure of what God promises unless God gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit. Those in whom the Spirit lives receive not just bread and juice at the Lord's Table, but Christ's body and blood, that we gratefully eat and drink.

And it is *faith* that sends Jesus' followers out from this place into the world, knowing that all the world is God's handiwork. *Faith* sends us into a place where the "architect and builder" is God, where one day God will make all things new. With the *confidence and assurance* of faith, may God fill us with yearning for an even deeper faith! The Lord bless this simple witness to his word. Amen.