

Sermon For Sunday, August 7, 2016 - "By Faith"

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 7, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[click here to see scriptures for today](#)

"By Faith"

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The church talks a lot about faith, but what is faith? In our second lesson today, the author of the book of Hebrews gives a good definition: "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith is both assurance and conviction.

Faith is assurance - it provides comfort and shelter amidst the storms of life.

- If you were in town on Thursday night during the terrible storm you know the importance of assurance, of comfort and shelter.
- Faith is like whatever gave you comfort that night - the protection of the basement, the flashlight beam, the presence of your loved ones or the knowledge that they were safe, the dog you held tight.
- Faith is what we cling to through all the turmoil of this world.

But faith isn't just assurance. Faith is also conviction - conviction that sends us out of the basement and into the street to get to work cleaning up, to check on and help our neighbor. Faith is the conviction that, even when things look bleak, God is at work and calls us to join that work.

Faith is holding fast to God's promises and moving forward with conviction. God's promises are that God has claimed us and will not let us go. No matter what happens we belong to God, we are held in God in life and death, now and forever. We belong to God and the future belongs to God. The God who raised Jesus from the dead will not stop bringing life out of death, working peace and well-being for all, making all things new. One day, God will make a home among us and mourning and crying and death will be no more. We have a future with hope. These promises are very reassuring. They are also a call, a call to move forward with conviction to follow as God leads us in working for the fulfillment of these promises. And if we're struggling to feel conviction, the best way to grow in it is to act as if these promises are true. When we put our treasure - our time, energy, resources and talent - toward living out these promises, then our hearts will follow as Jesus says in our Gospel reading today. We'll be more able to trust them.

We get a picture of what this looks like in the stories of Sarai and Abram who were given new names, Sarah and Abraham. We heard parts of their story in our first and second lessons today. Abraham and Sarah were promised a future with hope. They were promised children as numerous as the stars in the sky and a homeland that God would give to them. God gave them these promises and called them to act on them, to act with conviction. They were told to leave their homes and follow God, trusting that God would keep God's promises and give them a future with hope.

- Yet years and years passed and Sarah and Abraham had no children.
- They were wanderers and foreigners, strangers in a strange land.
- They doubted God's promise.
- They took matters into their own hands by trying to get a child through Sarah's slave Hagar.

They struggled mightily. Still God continued to assure them that they would have children, they would have a home.

- So even with all their doubts and struggles, Sarah and Abraham held on to these assurances and continued to move forward.
- They continued to follow, continued to live in tents trusting that God was leading them to into a future with hope.
- They did not get to live in the homeland God had promised, but they were given a son even when they were very old.

We hear Sarah and Abraham's story in our second lesson from Hebrews told with the repeated refrain, "by faith..." By faith they obeyed, by faith they lived in tents, by faith they received the gift of a son, by faith... Next week, as we continue in the book of Hebrews, we'll hear more stories told with this same refrain, "by faith..." We need to hear these stories of faith to encourage us to hold fast to God's promise and move into God's future. These stories are found in scripture but they are also found all around us. By faith, the founding members of Good Shepherd started a new congregation on the west side of Decorah. They, including some of you here today, trusted God's promises and followed God into the future. By faith, this congregation helped to resettle 350 southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam war. You trusted in God's care for all people and acted to make that care known. By faith, this congregation became a Reconciling in Christ congregation long before any other non-student congregation in our synod did so. Recently we designated all-gender bathrooms and the Council added the words 'queer identifying' to our welcome statement. We trust God's welcome for all people and act to make that welcome known.

By faith, we are assured of God's abundance intended for all people, and so we give our time and our money through Lutheran Disaster Response, ELCA World Hunger Appeal, the community meal, the Kids' Lunch Club and in so many other ways. By faith, you care for one another, you send cards and flowers when times are difficult, you visit, you check in after storms to see how you can help. By faith, my grandmother raised my father alone for ten years after she was widowed while pregnant with him. She also had no parental support because she had been orphaned at age thirteen; but by faith, she lived with gratitude and joy. By faith, she and my aunts and uncles, and my sister and I cared for my dad after my mom died as he was dying of cancer. By faith, we as the ELCA are having difficult conversations about racism and white privilege as we seek to live out our faith in God's care for all people and our conviction that all people are, and need to be, treated as God's beloved children.

The author of Hebrews writes that all of these who lived by faith also died with faith without having fully received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. We too may die without ever seeing the culmination of the future, without seeing a world where peace prevails and justice reigns and death is no more. But even now, as Hebrews says, we see these things from a distance and we greet them with joy. **By faith, we seek the homeland that awaits us on that day when God makes God's home among us mortals and every tear will finally be wiped from our eyes. By faith, we look forward to that day even as we continue to live this day with hope and conviction.**

Next week, as we read from Hebrews, we will hear the names of others who lived by faith, among them Rahab, Gideon, David and Samuel. Whose names would you add to this list? Who have you witnessed living by faith in your life? In your family? In this congregation? I invite you to think about that today over coffee, during brunch, and this week with your families, with your neighbors. And then, take just a moment to record those names and how they lived by faith. I've given you some examples in this sermon. But now I want to hear from you. So today, on your way out, please take a sheet of paper to record your responses. You can also email them to me or send them to me on Facebook. Who knows, these stories might make it into the sermon next week.

Let's take a moment to reflect on and give thanks for those in our lives who are examples of living by faith.

Amen.

