



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 7, 2022
ISAIAH 1:1,10-20; PSALM 50:1-8,23-24; HEBREWS 11:1-3,8-16; LUKE 12:32-40

THE ESSENCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16 [Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old-- and Sarah herself was barren-- because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

About a week ago, 28 pilgrims from Saint Mark's returned from our exploration of Celtic Christian holy places in Scotland and England. We spent four days on the Isle of Iona, where the Irish monk St. Columba and his companions founded a monastery in 563

CE. This community became a vibrant center of religious growth, academic study, and spiritual formation for both men and women, many of whom then set out themselves to establish new Christian communities in Britain and beyond.

One such man was St. Aidan, another Irish monk from Iona who traveled to Northumbria in England, converting the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity and establishing a monastery and scriptorium at Lindisfarne, also called Holy Island. We celebrated Eucharist in the Church of St. Mary on Holy Island, whose origins go back to St. Aidan's founding in 635. It was a moving experience – the palpable presence of 1400 years of ongoing prayer seemed to saturate the space and draw our group into a timeless community.

We also visited the majestic ruins of Whitby Abbey, perched on a cliff overlooking the North Sea. It was here that the abbess St. Hild founded a double monastery for both nuns and monks in 657 and hosted the Synod of Whitby, a pivotal council in the Celtic church when the King of Northumbria decided to adopt the Roman Church practices. Records from the time tell of Hild's steady leadership and her great wisdom in the midst of turbulence and change.

As we learned the stories of these holy women and holy men, what stood out was their perseverance, their humility, and their love for their communities. They endured harsh weather and illness and Viking raids

(multiple!) and the wrath of Henry VIII. They are surely exemplary for what they did, but maybe even more for what they did not do – give up. They are prototypes of faithfulness – lovers of God in their particular time and place whose memory continues to draw pilgrims on their own journey of faith.

I've been wondering about their faith – where it came from, how they understood it, and how it informs ours 1500 years later.

So I am intrigued by our second reading today, a portion of the letter to the Hebrews, written in 65-75 CE by a disciple of St. Paul to a Roman community facing persecution. A literal translation of the first two verses is, "Now, faith is the essence (hypostasis) of things hoped for, the conviction of that which is not seen. By faith our ancestors bore witness." Faith is the essence of things hoped for, the conviction of that which is not seen. By their faith, our ancestors Hild, Columba, and so many whose names we don't know, bore witness to the reality and goodness of God.

If faith is the essence of things hoped for, then it is not an intellectual achievement. It is not an unquestioning affirmation of a particular creed or measured by the ability to live

piously and stay focused on the hope of future salvation. It is not the absence of questions or doubt.

We join with Christians throughout the world every Sunday in professing the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith from the early fourth century. We also say the fifth century Apostles Creed at baptisms and daily worship. These texts link us to our spiritual ancestors and express our basic beliefs about the one God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies all. And – we take our place in the long history of Christian theologians and mystics who reflect on and challenge the creeds and express in their own words what it means to believe. Faith is not monolithic. Sister Joan Chittister ¹ is one of those theologians. She writes, “To say “I believe” is to say that my heart is in what I know but do not know, what I feel but cannot see, what I want and do not have, however much I have. To say, “I believe” is to say “yes” to the mystery of life.”

Faith is knowledge of the Truth not so much in our minds but in the depth our souls. We

come to know that truth through prayer, exploring scripture in community, and other spiritual practices. One that is so rich here in the Pacific Northwest is listening for and to God in creation.

When we immerse ourselves in nature, in the wilderness or a tree on the corner, we can experience a quiet wisdom that right-sizes us and opens our heart to what is eternal. Then, the ways in which we are completely interconnected with each other and all of creation provide strength to take up our small role in repairing the world.

One more thing. What are these “things hoped for” whose essence is faith? Often, we conceive of hope as oriented to the future, that hope looks like positivity or confidence in better times to come. But Thomas Keating offers deeper wisdom. He writes, “To hope for something better in the future is not the theological virtue of hope. Theological hope is based on God alone, who is both infinitely merciful and infinitely powerful *right now*.” ²

He says, “Here is a formula to deepen . . . the virtue of hope with its unbounded confidence

¹ <https://www.joanchittister.org/articles/i-believe-god-reflection-apostles-creed>

² Thomas Keating, “Reflections on the Unknowable.” Thanks to Victoria Szydlowski and Matt Briggs for sharing this with me.

in God. Let whatever is happening happen and go on happening. Welcome whatever it is. Let go into the present moment by surrendering to its content.... The divine energies are rushing past us at every nanosecond of time. Why not reach out and catch them by continuing acts of self-surrender and trust in God?"

I think this is the hope to which our ancestors bore witness. A hope that is founded on giving ourselves to *who God is now*, not on what we imagine the future to hold. And its core is faith – the soul's knowledge of God's abiding presence and love.

One of the gifts of pilgrimage is the ability to step outside daily rhythms and commitments. Time can seem to stand still. On Iona, as we walked and prayed in ancient

places, relishing the changing weather, our senses were primed to the smells of the land, the feel of the wind, the particular shades of sea and sky. As we touched the eternal rocks or lay on the humming ground, we could relax into the NOW and wonder about the divine energies rushing all about us. It was good practice. Faith is practice.

And, whether we travel or not, we are all pilgrims in this beautiful and hurting world. May we follow in the footsteps of the holy women and men before us, practicing faith in our own time and place. Amen.

