

Faith

A while back Big Bend Hospice hosted a panel discussion as part of a day-long workshop for doctors, nurses, caregivers, and clergy. The subject was death and dying. There were three panelists – one Rabbi, one Imam, and one Christian pastor. (That sounds a bit like an old joke.) At one point in the planning process, the steering committee thought it might be better to have two Christians on the panel— one Protestant and one Catholic. Then, apparently, someone suggested that the pastor of First Presbyterian could be asked to carry the ball for both teams.

I accepted the invitation, but then began to have misgivings. Did they want me because I'm *ecumenical* or because I'm *confused*? Whatever the case, it's worth asking this morning what it is that all Christians have in common.

At first blush, I'd have said that the answer is *faith*. Faith in the Triune God. Faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in a God who loves the world. Surely all Christians can agree on *that*. It's all about faith.

But what *is* faith? I know Christians who speak of faith in quantitative terms. According to them, the more faith you have, the happier and more prosperous you will be. If you have lots of faith, your business will prosper. Your children will make good grades. Your spouse will think you're wonderful.

Conversely, if things aren't going your way – if your car's engine throws a rod, or you get fired, or you come down with a dreadful disease – you obviously don't have enough faith. If you did, this kind of thing wouldn't happen to you.

The most obvious problem with this understanding of faith is that it is so patently unbiblical. The prophet Jeremiah had faith. That didn't keep his enemies from chunking him down a well. Moses had faith. That didn't keep him from missing the boat across the Jordan into the Promised Land. Paul had faith. That didn't keep him from being shipwrecked and horsewhipped several times over.

Having faith didn't save Dietrich Bonhoeffer from the hangman's noose or Martin Luther King, Jr. from the assassin's bullet. Whatever it is, faith is neither the key to financial success nor a get-out-of-jail-free card to be kept in your pocket until needed.

I know other people who regard faith as an exercise of will in the face of all evidence to the contrary. These include Christians who insist that the world is no more than 10,000 years old no matter what scientists tell them about carbon dating. In this category are folks who regard the theory of evolution as some sinister plot to poison the minds of our nation's youth and climate-change deniers who crank up the a.c. in their gas-guzzling vehicles and just keep driving.

For them "faith" means clinging to a world view that made perfect sense in the days before Galileo, Copernicus, Darwin, and Einstein, but makes little sense now.

"Don't confuse me with the facts. My faith is made up." If *that's* what faith means, all of us should turn in our cell phones and join the Flat Earth Society.

The 11th chapter of Hebrews contains one of the most familiar definitions of faith in all of scripture. Here it is in the New Revised Standard Version: "**Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**" Having given this definition, the writer goes on to list a long string of ancestors who are exemplars of the faith – heroes and heroines such as Abraham, Sarah, Noah, Moses, Samson, Rahab, Jephthah, and a great cloud of others.

Before we go too far into that list, I'd like to re-examine that definition. (If this starts to sound like a word study, I'm afraid it is. This is what Presbyterians get for requiring ministers to learn Greek.)

"**Faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for . . .**" As much as I like the New RSV, I'm not sure that's a very good translation. The word is *hypostasis*. "**Faith is the *hypostasis* of things hoped for.**" To translate that word as "assurance" gives it a decidedly psychological spin. Faith is a kind of inner confidence, a personal sense of certainty: *Blessed hypostasis! Jesus is mine!*

I'm not at all sure that's what *hypostasis* means in the passage. The writer of Hebrews uses this word twice earlier in the letter. In Hebrews 1:3 the writer says of

Jesus, **“He is the reflection of God’s glory, the exact imprint of God’s *hypostasis*.”** Most translations make this out to mean **“being”** or **“substance.”** In this context *hypostasis* has a philosophical connotation. Jesus is the reflection, the imprint, of the essence of God, God’s *hypostasis*.

In chapter three, verse 14, the same word has ethical connotations. **“For we have become partners of Christ if only we hold to our first *hypostasis*, our first *confidence* firm to the end.”** If **confidence** is the right word here, it means more than personal experience. It means something Christians share in community, something that forms them into partners with Christ.

I have a similar problem with NRSV’s translation of the word *elegchos* as **“conviction.”** **“Faith is . . . the *conviction* of things not seen.”** *Elegchos* usually means “proof.” Not a private *conviction*, but a public *demonstration*.

Here’s my attempt at translating this very difficult phrase. ***Faith is the groundwork of things hoped for, the proof of what is not yet seen.***

Faith is not mere wishful thinking, nor is it a strictly private matter. It is standing on a foundation shared by a community that lives in the present but anticipates a future securely held in God’s hands. Faith is trust that the God we have already met in the person of Jesus Christ is the same God who waits for us in the future.

Here’s an analogy. Imagine that a good friend invites you to a grand party – the kind that requires a printed invitation to get in. “I’ll send you an invitation,” the friend says. She does, but something happens to it – the stamp on the envelope falls off, or the postman goes postal. Whatever the reason, you don’t get the physical invitation in time for the big party. But you know your hostess well. You have her personal invitation, and are sure that if you go, you will be welcome. So you buy yourself a new outfit, put it on, and go the party.

When you get there, there are two professional wrestlers at the door, checking invitations. Just behind them, the table is spread, the wine uncorked, and the band tuned up, poised to play the first note. Your hostess appears, pushing the bouncers aside. “At last! You’re here!” your hostess says. “We’ve been waiting because we didn’t want to start without *you*.”

The location of that party, according to Biblical imagination, is the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. That's where we're all headed, by faith.

By faith, says the writer of Hebrews, Abraham pulled up stakes and headed off to the land God promised as an inheritance without knowing where he was going. All the time he was camped in the Promised Land, the writer says, Abraham was looking forward to **“the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”** Even the Promised Land was just a stop along the way.

Faith prompts people to do brave and selfless things, the writer says. By faith, Moses refused to be called an Egyptian, even though he was raised in Pharaoh's palace by Pharaoh's own daughter. Instead Moses cast his lot with the Hebrews, the people of God's promise.

Mmmmm. The writer of Hebrews would make a good spin doctor for presidential candidates. He fails to mention how Abraham got tired of waiting for Sarah to get pregnant and had a son by a servant girl. He also leaves out that episode in Moses' life when he killed an Egyptian official, hid his body in the sand, and left Egypt in the dead of night. And didn't Moses try to weasel out of going back to Egypt on the grounds that he was a poor public speaker?

Dare I point out that in that long list of faithful people we can find Sarah, who laughed out loud at God's promise to make her a mother, and Rahab, a common prostitute? Neither of these ladies would be candidates for the Presbyterian Women's lifetime achievement award.

The writer's point is not that faith makes us perfect. It's that faith sets on the journey. Faith gets us headed in the right direction, even when we're not sure which direction that might be.

Abraham could have said to God, “I'm afraid I'll need more than a verbal promise if you want me and Sarah to leave Westminster Oaks and take off for parts unknown.” I know I wouldn't have blamed him.

But in Abraham's case, as in so many Biblical examples, *faith* seems to accompany God's *call*. That *hypostasis*, that groundwork, is laid in the very instant that God calls us into God's service and makes us God's children by sheer grace.

Abraham must have had his doubts, but they didn't keep him from cashing out his IRA and buying a second-hand Winnebago. And even when he and Sarah lost sight of God's promise, God never lost sight of them.

Despite the favorable treatment given them in the letter to the Hebrews, our forerunners in the faith were a mixed bag. If faith were a quantitative matter, some of them would have been hard pressed to fill a thimble with it. If faith were a matter of clinging stubbornly to the old and familiar, none of them would have made the list in the first place.

What they had in common, the writer seems to be saying, is the groundwork laid for them by God and the hope that is kept alive not by force of individual will, but by the community that is formed by grace. With God's call came enough faith to make the first step. From that point on, they were never on their own.

Which brings me back to that panel discussion about death I'm had with the Rabbi and the Imam. What should a Christian say about death and dying? Actually, that's an easy one. The *Heidelberg Catechism* answered that one long ago:

Question 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

Answer: That I belong--body and soul, in life and in death--not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Faith is the groundwork of things hoped for, the proof of what is not yet seen. That's as good a definition as any, but the most important thing about faith is not defining it – it's living it.