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Washington, D.C.

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Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, 12:1  
Meal Train

*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. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*

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Emily Dickinson wrote,       “Faith—is the Pierless Bridge  
Supporting what We see  
Unto the Scene that We do not—

A pierless bridge. Faith is what connects us from what is seen to the unseen. That’s a great image. Faith is believing that there is more than meets the eye. In many places in the bible, faith is described as something you passively receive. You kind of have it or you don’t. But in the letter to the Hebrews, faith is described in a more active way. Faith is used as a verb, meaning acts of faithfulness. We only read part of this long chapter but in this chapter the word faith is used twenty-four times and usually it is referencing actions taken by people. By faith...it says and then it tells us what the people did. The author begins with their definition of faith and then tells us how that faith was enacted.

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Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen. It is one of the most famous definitions of faith in the bible but like most passages of scripture, it is much more meaningful if you can see the passage in the larger chapter or book of scripture. Because this passage alone sounds very cerebral. But to the author, faith is not just a thing that is happening in our brains – faith is active, faith is acting, faith is moving, faith is risking, faith is stepping out.

The Christian author, Fredrick Buechner's definition is: "Faith is not being sure where you're going but going anyway. A journey without maps." Faith is a journey without maps. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen – embarking on the journey of your life, trusting in God, without knowing exactly how things will unfold.

Do we ever go anywhere these days without ready access to a map? Every trip we take these days has a map programmed into a device, our arrival times are estimated, we are warned of slowdowns, and accidents ahead. My car is so smart, it predicts where I am usually traveling at that time of day and pulls up a map based on my patterns. When we set out on trips across town or across country and we generally know where we are going. When my kids ask me how long until we get there, I can say 46 minutes or something very specific. If I responded by say I have absolutely no idea that would not compute in their brains. But that is not traveling by faith. Traveling by faith has a different quality to it all together. It is a posture and an orientation more than a step-by-step process. You are committing to the destination not the specifics of the journey. You committing to a life of faith, not how that life will unfold. You are committing to trusting in God's promises, even when they take longer than you would like. The author reminds us of Abraham's story. He was asked to pick up and move to new land and to trust that in that land he would prosper. No road map, just a destination.

Having faith in things hoped for and things unseen takes grit and tenacity and requires commitment and trust. Particularly in the face of despair and trial and heartbreak. Faith requires us to dig deep within ourselves and believe that God's promises are sure – even when circumstances can seem so contrary. Abraham is just one of the people mentioned as an example for how to live by faith - Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses...on and on people's names are listed and their stories are told. It is a parade of saints. The commonality of their stories is that they all had some form of adversity and they all lived by faith in God's promises. By listing these names and stories, the author wishes to surround the readers with a great cloud of witnesses – as a visible signs of hope and grace. These are people who have walked the walk and they are set out encouragers.

Our congregation over the last few weeks has faced a series of very painful losses. Nancy McCulloch, Astrid Quinn, Grace Quinn, Bud McFarlane, Nancy Bradley, and Oliver Gillum – these are the souls I am talking about. Three of them had incredibly long and full lives. Three of them never left the hospital. That's a lot for us in a month. This unexpected season of grief has many of us asking questions as we mourn these deaths.

As a Christian community, we better have something to say in the face of such grief. We better have something to hope for, we better have some conviction of things unseen – otherwise what are we doing here? But traveling without a map is very different than traveling with no destination. The Christian faith has a destination. The faith we have is that there is life after

death, and that there is a reunion with God and with each other after this life. Our faith is about hoping and trusting and believing against all evidence to the contrary that there is vastly more to this world than we can see. Faith is the eyes of our heart seeing more.

We see that the chaos of the world is not the last word. We see that the world is God's creation, and it is God who redeems us. We see that in Christ, the painful partings we make with loved ones in this world are not final. We see that there is indeed hope and goodness and truth. Conviction of things unseen.

And when that conviction wears thin, and doubts rise within us it does not mean our faith has failed – it is just our turn to rely on the cloud of witnesses. We have this inspiring cloud of witnesses both living and gone before us, who can be a bridge for us – a bridge from what is seen to what is unseen.

After the recent losses people reached out asking what they could do. We told them they could show up to the memorial service, pray for their family, send food. When I logged in to see the status of the meal trains, I read a litany of names of people who had signed up. It brought tears to my eyes to see the cloud of witnesses showing up with soups, salads, snacks, and compassion.

In Elizabeth Gilbert's book *Eat, Pray, Love* she tells this story about a conversation with her sister:

A family in my sister's neighborhood was recently stricken with a double tragedy, when both the young mother and her three-year-old son were diagnosed with cancer. When Catherine (sister) told me about this, I could only say, shocked, "Dear God, that family needs grace." She replied firmly, "That family needs *casseroles*," and then proceeded to organize the entire neighborhood into bringing that family dinner, in shifts, every single night, for an entire year. I do not know if my sister fully recognizes that this *is* grace.

Casseroles are grace. I kind of want that on a t-shirt. When you pray for someone, or send them a card, or do something nice for their kid, or you bring them muffins, or you show up to the memorial service of their parent or their spouse or their child – you aren't being nice – you are joining the ranks of the faithful. It isn't one card which will make anyone feel better – but the repeated acts of grace and mercy and love – small as they might be – they collectively point to something more than what is seen before us, it points to the lasting, the eternal, the divine.

In the church, we take turns showing grace to each other. We take turns showing faithfulness to each other. And in doing so, we enable others to keep the faith. In the letter to the Hebrews, active lives of faith are set within the context of the supportive, encouraging community of the saints. We were never supposed to live this faith alone. Jesus called the disciples together, commissioned them in pairs, asked them to create and be the church. Faith within a community of believers enables the us to persevere and be courageous even amid the most difficult circumstances.

Do you know the feeling when you are trying to get out of a stadium, or a concert and the crowd is so dense that all you can really do is just go with the flow? Well that image to me is the cloud of witnesses – it is the faithful walking the walk and sweeping up those who are lost along the

way. We carry those who need it along with us. We show up for them. We bring them casseroles. We help, in our small little ways, by participating in the life of faith, and creating a cloud which will carry them for a season.

The author concludes this passage with this benediction:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*

Thank you for being the cloud of witnesses for God's people in this place. You need to know that you are important. You are needed. Your faith is inspiring to others. And your life is a visible sign of God's grace. Thank you for carrying others with you in that light and in that love.

Amen.

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