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The Assurance of Things Hoped For

Text: Hebrews 11: 1-4, 8, 13-26, 23-28

According to the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In saying this, our writer certainly means to commend faith. But, especially these days, not everybody sees faith as a commendable thing, at least not the sort of faith that is convinced of unseen things. Richard Dawkins in his strident and badly argued book *The God Delusion*, for example, thinks that being convinced about things unseen is very bad, indeed.. He says that “faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument.” Indeed, he thinks faith is so evil that it is pernicious to teach it as a virtue to children, and that teaching faith is even a form of child abuse, for he says, “faith can be very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong.”

Yet, despite Dawkins, it is hard to imagine a world without faith. Such a world would lack an important excellence that makes for human flourishing. It has always been understood to be so, and faith has been praised accordingly. For example, Wordsworth, in the face of loss, talks of “the faith that looks through death.” He also writes in a similar vein:

If, as toward the silent tomb, we go
Through love, through hope, and faith’s transcendent dower,
We feel that we are greater than we know.

Shakespeare talks of the sort of honesty that is in faith when he notes that “there are no tricks in simple and honest faith.” Milton, for his part, talks of “pure-ey’d faith” and Cowper wrote of “

an unchanging love” that is “free and faithful, strong as death.” We would be worse off, if we didn’t have faith like that.

The excellence of faith comes in two parts, its trust, and its trustability, its faithfulness. Without the first, faith, we would not trust others, and would believe ourselves justified in continually resorting to trickery. Without the second, faithfulness, we would not be dependable, nor constant. Without faith we would continually be suspicious, and we would never find any ground on which we would be willing to stand, for proof has to start and stop somewhere. Without faithfulness, our friends could not trust us, nor we them.

Perhaps critics such as Dawkins would not object to faith as gentle as this. They particularly would not object, one would hope, to faithfulness. Their target, after all, is the practice of believing things without proof or justification, not moral dependability. But faithfulness does not stand alone as a commendable virtue and apart from faith as believing. There is a connection between the sort of faithfulness that allows men and women to be dependable, constant, and trustable, and the faith that accepts and trusts the unseen. One suspects that these critics know this connection very well, for they actually play upon it. They try very hard to make a necessary connection between the sort of faith which they think is simply believing without justification or proof, and fanaticism, which is really the pathological ersatz of faith. It is because of this supposedly necessary root of fanaticism that apparently Dawkins thinks rationalists like himself can never be fanatical, the outrageous and cocksure claims of his book notwithstanding.

Now, nobody disputes that fanaticism is wrong and that there are risks of some people confusing faithfulness with fanaticism. These are risks that have to be run, though, for one cannot have the genuine virtues of faith, even the sort that just gives us basic decency, without

some kind of faith in what is unseen, and undemonstrated. For example, simply at the level of basic human decency, genuine and abiding friendship depends upon the sort of faith that lets us see something of our friends that no one else can see. We might easily assume that any number of people are good people; we are loyal to friends, however, because we have faith in them.

Why? Because we can see in them things that may not at all be evident to others. And indeed, we may see goodness in them in ways that we don't see it deeply in others, because our friends are willing to reveal their inmost being to us, knowing that they can trust us because we believe in them. Without faith in them, we would not know them; they would not let us know them. Faith is what receives and encourages revelation and deep knowledge, even in the most basic of human relations.

But if this is true in basic human relations, it is all the more true in religious life. To be holy, to have the sort of goodness that is great, faith in the unseen is required. Wordsworth's point is right, it is going through love, hope, and transcendent faith that makes us greater than we know. That is not because faith gives us a merit in God's eyes that others don't have; it is because faith really is a virtue, that is to say, a power of the mind and heart that lets us see what is great and good. Its power is simply that it trusts that God has revealed himself and will reveal himself. God does really does reveal himself to that sort of faith. That is why he gave faith as a gift in the first place – so he could make himself known to women and men. So faith lets us see what is unseen, and that vision of the unseen gives us the assurance of those great unseen things, and that assurance then gives birth to the great hopes that lie so deep in the human heart.

It is this sort of faith that the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* wants to commend to his hearers. It is what he wants to use to exhort and encourage them as they are flagging in their life together. But he does so in the first place, not by telling them to have faith. Rather, he does

something that is far more effective. He shows them that they have come to be a church because of the faith of so many men and women in the past. He gives them examples of faith, and he bids them to be faithful to those examples.

Let me simply take one example, the one that may be the most striking of all. It is the example of Moses. Of Moses, our preacher says this: "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing to share ill treatment with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin."

The description is cryptic, and not at all what one would normally expect if one were going to praise Moses as a man of faith. One normally thinks of Moses as a great man of faith because of the extraordinary things he did. He is the one who faced down Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth; he divided the Red Sea; he talked with God; he delivered the Ten Commandments. All of these things were crucial to the Hebrew community; indeed, without them that community never would have existed. But according to this phrase, it was none of these things that made Moses a man of great faith. Rather, it was the simple act of identifying with the Hebrew people, of seeing himself as one with them, even in their suffering.

Why is this such a big deal? Well, in the first place, Moses didn't have to identify with this people. He was raised as a prince in the royal court of the Egyptians. Some scholars, citing the Egyptian root of his name, suggest that Moses really was Egyptian through and through, and that the story of his being born of a Hebrew is a later invention. Whether or not this can be sustained, the point is that Moses at first considered himself as one of Pharaoh's children, and could have until his dying day enjoyed the life of a ruler, one of the power elite. But he did not. Indeed, it seems that when he looked at the Egyptians, the very people who raised him, he did not see himself as belonging to them at all. It was, rather, in looking at the Hebrews,

insignificant and contemptible as they were to Egyptian eyes – and Moses’ eyes were originally Egyptian – that he saw himself. He saw his life; he saw real life in them. Most of all what he saw in these people was the future. He saw in them the future of humankind, not because they had what we call “potential,” because they didn’t. They were slaves and were nothing. Rather, the future he saw in them was the fulfillment of the promises of a God, who, at that point, had been largely forgotten and whose hand in history was also invisible. But because he saw the otherwise unseen hand of God in the destiny of this people, because he was convinced of it, and had the assurance of hope, this people became exactly what he saw in them. If he had not seen this unseen future in them, one cannot imagine that he would have even bothered to attempt any of the other things that he later did. If he had not hoped in this way, there would have been no Jesus Christ to bring God’s community into God’s life.

Thus, the writer of *Hebrews* goes on to argue, if so many great figures of the past had the faith to stake themselves on an invisible and unlikely future, then the Christian community which has seen the fullness of God’s revelation that those ancestors looked forward to ought all the more to hold to their own faith. All of God’s history had moved towards their community and what they had was what all their ancestors had hoped for. As that hoped for community, they then should persevere, laying aside every weight that was keeping them down.

That is the exhortation given them, and it can be an effective one. For a community that was tired, and ready to go back to a time when things were better, our preacher reminds them that the vital center of that earlier community, the vital center of that previous time to which they wanted to return, was the hope that now lay as a present reality in the midst of their present community. For that reason, they couldn’t go back, because to do so would actually be a betrayal of what all the great figures of the past stood for. It would be throwing away what the past

expected would be made of its hope. You can't go back and then hope for what you just rejected. Moses and the all figures of faith in the past wouldn't be proud of them.

That is important, and a formidable reason not to retreat. It gives encouragement as well, for it indicates that the goal of the race is in sight. But I don't think that our preacher was *just* pointing out that this community should recognize that they now had what their ancestors had hoped for, and worked for, unseen as it was in their time. I think he was also pointing out to this community that although the Christ for whom the world had waited now had been revealed, and that they ought to take particular confidence in that, still, they, too, in these days needed to have the sort of faith that grasps the unseen, and that has the assurance of things hoped for.

Why? Because sometimes what has been revealed is no longer clear. Even if one can say in no uncertain terms *what* has been revealed, still, sometimes nobody understands what it means anymore, or nobody feels the challenge and the call it poses. Somewhere along the way, light has been lost. Now, light gets lost in any number of ways. Suffering, for example, and the experience of evil darkens our eyes. We get tired, we come close to being defeated, and we can't see that there is any end to the race at all, and we despair. Carelessness on our part and sin also cause us to lose light. For even the most important things start losing their importance in our eyes when we quit paying attention to them. More than one friendship, more than one marriage, more than one church has been lost because somebody or other forgot how important the friendship or the marriage was or forgot how important prayer really is. Even God himself loses importance to us when we fall down before the idols of our own making – our prestige, the prestige of others; I don't need to mention them all, for you know the drill.

When that happens, when light is lost, what is required to make something good of the situation, to make us greater than we know, is the faith that is convinced of the unseen, and that

takes that conviction as the assurance of things hoped for. What is required are men and women of faith to see that God really does have his hand in this community, and that God means to make something of it and that are willing to pitch and work and lead towards *that* future. That something that we need to see is not potential; any sharp-eyed humanist can see human potential. And human potential is simply human, anyhow. Moreover, when the light is lost, there isn't a lot of potential going around. No, what needs to be seen is something that Moses saw long ago in Hebrew slaves who were nothing, namely, *what God intends to make of them*. What needs to be seen is *God's* future.

As we now come to the end of Advent, let us have that kind of faith. Let us have it in our lives and let us have it in this church. Let us have the kind of vision that does not retreat to a comfortable past, nor that asks for a comfortable and unchallenging future. Let us have the sort of faith that really is convinced that God is doing something great in our midst. We have good reason to be convinced of that for unlike Moses, Christ has already once come to us and we have already seen in the face of Jesus Christ what that future looks like. Unlike Moses, we know that God has already come among us and revealed to us what God wants for us. But like Moses, we, too, need to have the faith to see that God really is doing that, and we need to be assured that God is forever faithful to his Word.