

Elizabeth Presbyterian Church
August 22, 2010
Dr. Bruce A. Spear
“By Faith...”

Prayer of Confession

“O God, your love is boundless and your grace exceeds our imaginations. You keep finding ways to be among us even when our hearts are hidden. You continue to seek us out even when the doors of our souls are locked. We cannot hide from your presence.

“We confess, however, that we are not always receptive to your presence. We get caught up in our own plans and the noise of our own urgencies.

“Correct our vision. Cleanse our hearts. Create in us a place where we can welcome you and receive the fullness of what you have given us in Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Assurance of Forgiveness

Jesus says to us, “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”

Message

On Friday, I took my city dog out for a long walk. We crossed County Road 45 and headed across the fields not knowing where we were going. After about 20 minutes we got to the top of a hill and on the other side, not too far away, was a Pronghorn antelope. (I realize that a Pronghorn is not really an antelope, but that was what it was in my mind.) This city slicker and his city dog stood there looking at this proud Pronghorn for several minutes. Then our city dog decided to see if Pronghorns can really run as fast as 50 miles an hour. Before I knew it they were out of my sight having gone over the next rise. I ran up the rise just in time to see them go over the next hill quite a ways in the distance. I kept walking worried that I had lost our dog until I saw her coming back over the hill by herself.

By that time we had to walk through somebody’s cow pasture and the dog tried playing tag with the cows until she realized they really couldn’t care less. Then she discovered a large cow pie, meadow muffin, whatever it you want to call it. She launched herself upside down into the cow pie and rubbed every part of her fur into every part of the cow poop. That is when I finally put her on a leash and walked her back to the apartment hoping we didn’t run into anyone. There I sprayed her down and gave her a bath with antibacterial soap so we wouldn’t get any germs or awful odors into our apartment.

Life is like that. It is a journey. We head out not knowing where we are going. It is ironic that in our modern age with GPS navigation and the ability to read our exact longitudes and latitudes on our Blackberries, iPhones or Droids, we still often do not know where we are going. We chase after things that move much faster than we do. We find we can’t keep up and have to regroup and try something else. We find ourselves in an environment where no one is interested in us, like my dog among the cows, and we feel lonely and misunderstood. We sometimes get mixed up and wallow around in poop until God comes along, rescues us from our own stupidity and gives us a good scrubbing.

What is it that sustains us along this journey? Where are we headed? How are we going to get there?

Let’s take those questions one at a time. What is it that sustains us along the way? Hebrews 11 says that it is our faith that sustains us. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.” Faith enables us to venture into the future not knowing where we are going. Our faith is built on our past experiences of God’s goodness and his faithfulness which we count on for the future. The God that has guided us in the past will certainly guide us in the future and sustain us along the way.

In essence it is not really our faith but God who sustains us on the long journey of life. Faith is our positive response to the goodness and faithfulness of God. Now in our modern culture, faith oftentimes has nothing to do with God. Faith is considered a human capacity, a power that some human beings have that others don’t have, the power to project a vision for the future and then go out and attain it through our own abilities and resourcefulness.

We have Ronnie Lott, the Hall of Fame safety for the 49ers, saying, "If you can believe it, the mind can achieve it." If you can just picture yourself as an all pro safety delivering a Jack Tatum hit on a running back, you can achieve that kind of power and success.

Anthony Robbins, our modern guru of success and prosperity, states, "If you develop the absolute sense of certainty that powerful beliefs provide, then you can get yourself to accomplish virtually anything, including those things that other people are certain are impossible." So if we are able to develop a power within us to achieve absolute certainty about ourselves and our future, then nothing will stand in our way. Meanwhile, others who don't have that faith in themselves and their abilities stand around thinking that success and prosperity are impossible.

But in Scripture faith is not a personal power or inward strength, it is always a response to something else. Faith cannot form itself or exist in and of itself. Faith is a human response to what God has done. Faith is always a positive response to the works and words of the living God.

God's works are in evidence all around us. Anyone who saw the sunset last night out here in Elbert County had to be comatose not to be moved by the power and beauty of our Creator God.

Or as the theologian J.I. Packer writes:

"The most universally awesome experience that humankind knows is to stand alone on a clear night and look at the stars. It was God who first set the stars in space; He is their Maker and Master . . . such are His power and His majesty."

That is one benefit of getting out from under the brown cloud in Denver and being able to look up and see untold millions of galaxies. When we realize that our planet is just a tiny speck in the universe, our minds are filled with amazement. As our text says, when we realize that God made this immense universe out of nothing, it just blows us away. This amazement and wonder is a positive response to God's greatness and as such constitutes faith that sustains us.

Coupled with the greatness of God is his goodness. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote:

"Our Creator would never have made such lovely days, and given us the deep hearts to enjoy them, above and beyond all thought, unless we were meant to be immortal."

There is something about the goodness of life, the goodness of the world around us, the breathtaking beauty of certain days in the fall or in the spring or whatever your favorite season is, that assure us that God is good. It is impossible that such goodness can be the result of a manipulative, coercive, malevolent power. No, when we witness the goodness and beauty around us, our hearts tell us that God is good and his creation is also amazingly good.

As Frederick Buechner says:

"Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. Touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are sacred moments and life itself is grace."

What Nathaniel Hawthorne and Frederick Buechner are telling us is that the most natural human response to the beauty and the goodness of the world around us is to believe in a kind and benevolent Creator.

And as St. Teresa used to say, "God is even kinder than you think."

John Calvin wrote that faith is "the firm knowledge of God's benevolence toward us." It is resting in the greatness and goodness of God that sustains us along the way.

As the writer to the Hebrews says, "anyone who approaches God must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him." When we respond to the greatness and goodness of God in faith rather than in unbelief, then that faith sustains us along the way.

This brings us to the second question? "Where are we going?" The answer in Hebrews is that we are going home. There is a city whose architect and builder is God. Those who walk and live by faith are sojourners in the land looking for this city. This place is a better country, a heavenly one and for that reason God is not ashamed to be called their God.

The heroes of the faith in this chapter had not arrived. They were sojourners. They lived in tents. They were camping out. They died not having received what they were looking for, but from a distance they saw the homeland they were looking for.

There are many places in this world and during this life where we feel at home. This is where we belong, this is home for us. It's not wrong to feel that way, but it is also good to remember that life has a way of changing things up on us, and what was once our home sometimes is no longer our home. Ultimately we are sojourners in the land. Sometimes God tells us it is time to leave, and obediently we go out again, not knowing where we are going. But we do know that one day God will welcome us home and that any feeling of belonging or being home in this life will only be magnified infinitely when we see Jesus face to face and he welcomes us home.

So that brings us to our last question? How are we going to get there? Joni Erickson Tada, the quadriplegic author and artist, sums up Hebrews 11 with this statement. "Faith isn't the ability to believe long and far into the misty future. It's simply taking God at His Word and taking the next step."

Faith is our natural turning to God, taking Him at his word, that he is good, reliable, and faithful, and then taking the next step.

As the theologian Karl Barth wrote:

"The act of faith is like the natural turning of a bud into a flower and its natural turning toward the sun, or the natural laugh of a child who had just experienced something funny. It does not matter if it be a weak faith that flickers with the gusts of life.

"Those who believe know that faith is not based on their own strength or reason. They believe in spite of the unbelief that also resides in them. Thus they will not boast that they have faith but only that they honestly respond to what they receive from God every morning, as the Israelites did with the manna in the wilderness."

Faith is a natural, honest, and obedient response to the goodness and faithfulness of God. Faith is not something we conjure up from within ourselves. Faith is not something that is based on our own strength or our own mental powers. As a response to God's power and glory, our faith draws its strength from God not from ourselves. It is the greatness of God that fuels our faith. It is like when I plug my blackberry into my desktop computer. My Blackberry doesn't energize my desktop computer, it is my desktop computer that recharges and energizes my Blackberry. Any USB device draws the power to operate from the computer you plug it into not the other way around.

Now there is also in us unbelief, that resistance to taking the next step, that refusal to follow God's leading in our lives. As Karl Barth wrote:

"The serious question is whether people – when shown the work of God taking place in their lives and in their world and the word of God spoken also into their lives and into their world, as well as the living power of the Holy Spirit also operating in their lives and in their world – can afford to persist with a barren attitude of 'I lack faith.' Or whether they will stop flirting with their own unbelief and live in the freedom given to them. As the Gospel recounts, 'I believe; help my unbelief! (Mk. 9:24)"

There is that part in us which doubts God's goodness and reliability. We wonder where the heck he is leading us. We don't want to take any more steps of faith until we have some evidence that we are headed to a good and happy place. We downgrade the evidence of God's goodness and faithfulness, we forget how God has led us and sustained us in the past. We magnify our doubts and our complaints until that is all we can see or think about.

But can we really afford to do that? My Blackberry can go for about a day without being plugged back in to the computer or the adapter to get recharged. Can we really afford to disconnect from the faithfulness and mercy of God to find our own way and live in our own strength? We may do so for a time, but our hearts will tell us to reconnect with God, to take him at his word, and to take that next step of faith, sustained not by our own power and vision, but sustained in faith by God's power and direction. And so we continue our journey home where Jesus has gone before us and has prepared a place for us, a place where we belong, a place where we will arrive when the pain and suffering of our journey is over.

Friday evening I noticed our dog sound asleep on the floor, clean and dry just the way city dogs like to be, but her feet were moving and she was giving little barks, dreaming about chasing wild animals in the open fields. She was home and she was happy.