

Sunday December 8, 2019
Lesson 2: Faith and Hope
Scripture: Hebrews 11: 1, 6-16

Context:

Our next lesson in hope moves to the New Testament. The book of Hebrews contains many allusions from the Old Testament to help the readers understand terms such as faith and hope. In today's lesson, we will examine the relationship between faith and hope.

While reading Hebrews, one might imagine hearing a sermon. The writer of Hebrews sounds like they are preaching a sermon and using points to deliver their goals.¹ Thus, the first line names faith as the main point and then names how faith plays out and ties to hope for the future. Faith is an assurance in something not seen and brings a conviction that God will be at work now and in the future.

To carry this point home, the author goes to the stories of old to discuss how faith and hope worked in tandem for those ancestors who responded to God. These ancestors carry certain themes that testify to their faith: they were righteous, journeyed obediently in faith, and were tested by suffering.² All of these ancestors foreshadow the virtues that come to perfection in Jesus, labeled as the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith."³ While the list does not go chronologically, the author covers as many as of the ancestors of the faith who fit into one or more of the four categories mentioned above.

The first ancestor in this passage is Noah, known for his obedience in building an ark before a world flood. Noah had a choice. He could listen to God and the warning that there would be a flood, or he could go with the world who saw no storm and simply wait it out. Noah was righteous by faith and not works, with his faith as a power that enabled him to be righteous, to do good works.⁴ This righteousness was pleasing to God.

The next ancestor of faith is Abraham. However, Abraham's story has a different ending. Abraham hears the calls to go to a new place, uprooting his family to go to a foreign land. Yet as he arrives, he is surrounded by Canaanites. The land that God has promised him and his family was full of other occupants. His journey is unfinished. What is the reader to make of these pilgrims and their incomplete journey? According to the author of Hebrews, the faith of Abraham reveals we have a God who keeps promises, one who sent the heavenly Son who brought hope to all the pilgrims who never make their

¹ Thomas G. Long, "Hebrews," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2012), 113.

² *Ibid.*, 115.

³ Heb. 12:2, NRSV.

⁴ Thomas G. Long, "Hebrews," 118.

journey complete.⁵ Jesus prepares a place for the faithful.

Application

When you think of the word pilgrims, what comes to mind? If you're like me, the first image might be of those individuals who crossed over the Atlantic in the seventeenth century looking for a new place to call home and ending up at Plymouth Rock. The term pilgrim conjures up associations with early America, religious freedom, hardship, and of course thanksgiving.

Yet pilgrim also can refer to those who find themselves on any type of journey. The book of Hebrews offers us a chance to see ourselves as pilgrims on a journey of faith. The destination sounds beautiful, but the trip is often less than ideal. There are storms, threats, and hazy days where we cannot see a thing. Yet we know that we are on the right path even if the destination does not come the way we expect.

We are reminded in this passage that faith is a beautiful gift. We have faith that is tied to our hope in God. It is a gift in which we may not always see the final results, but there is assurance that we are on the right path.

Like our ancestors Noah and Abraham, we will face our obstacles along the way. Noah was mocked for his decision to build the ark. Yet he did it anyways. Abraham went to the Promised Land and conceived a child in old age. However, this new land had occupants and he did not make it to the final sight to see what became of the land or his descendants. In both cases, the ancestors were pilgrims carrying nothing but faith as their guiding compass.

All of us are pilgrims on a faith journey. Like Noah and Abraham, we will face times where our faith is all that we can cling too. When everything else is being stripped away from us, that is the one thing that no one can steal from us. We may not see things end or happen as we want, but we still have the promise that our God has claimed and made a place for us.

There is the story of a wise business leader who was facing quite a storm. There were angry customers who wanted the company to cater to their every whim. The board of directors was in turmoil about what to do, and the easy solution was to start firing people to make it seem like change was happening. Throughout the workplace, there was a buzz, a tension that seemed to be in all the hallways whether it was individuals talking in hushed corners or nervous glances going in and out of offices.

In the course of it, the business leader pulled one of the younger managers into their office. They discussed the situation that was taking place and the palpable tension and what might happen. During the conversation, the business leader took the opportunity to share a verse that was giving them strength: "The Lord is the stronghold of my life-- of whom shall I be afraid?"⁶ Instead of saying the company's name as the stronghold of their life, they repeated that it was the Lord who was the stronghold of their life. That quote sustained the business leader and the younger manager in a dark time.

As you think of your pilgrim journey with our Lord, perhaps it is the time to reflect what faith and hope really mean to you. What do you cling to when your world is

⁵ Ibid., 119.

⁶ Psalm 27:1; NRSV.

falling apart? How can you identify with the stories of Noah and Abraham? When was a time that faith in God was what carried you? How do you find faith in the midst of hazy times? Who are your heroes of the faith who have helped you on your journey?

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