

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” Heb 11:1

“Give me a sign, show me what to do” How many of you have asked this of God? I know I have. When we are at a crossroads, when we don’t know where to go next, when endings call us into new and unknown beginnings.

Not only do we look for an answer, scripture is full of people wanting sign as well. The psalmist in Psalm 86 prays to God, “Show me a sign of your favor.” In the gospel of Matthew we read, “Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”

As many of you know, I have come from Missouri, which is the show-me state. There are many explanations of our unofficial state motto. One is that a congressman from Missouri, found himself in Washington in the midst of a debate and said, “I come from a country that raises corn and cotton, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I’m from Missouri, and you have got to show me.” “Seeing is believing” But also, some people say the motto means, “I’m skeptical of the matter and not easily convinced.” I’m not going to take your word for it, you’ve got to prove it to me.

We live in a world of post modernism, which questions traditional bases of authority – and I might say, rightly so. It is because of this questioning that we have been able to hear the voices of those long-silenced by traditional institutions: women, people of color, those held down by injustice and inequality. We rightly suspect systems that perpetuate injustice and oppress people. But where does our suspicion end?

“Postmodernism approaches life with a hermeneutic of suspicion. People believe they have been taken advantage of. They feel their bosses take advantage of them. They feel merchants take advantage of them. They feel the government takes advantage of them. After a while, a paranoia brews that becomes pathologic. A motorist appears helpless, standing beside their car on the highway. Steam escapes from under the raised hood. During an earlier day, we would have stopped. But today,

who's to day that it's not a play to ambush some unsuspecting do-gooder. We drive by, assuming that someone else will have the means to handle the situation." (Lectionary Homiletics).

We're so suspicious, we don't trust anyone, and instead we turn inward and away from community – trusting only in ourselves, and our own power. We rely on what we see to define who we are and what we see in us and around us is not always good.

Everywhere we look we are confronted with bad news of unemployment, and violence erupting in our communities and around the world. If you read the magazines and ads, they tell us we're too fat, unstylish, etc. And the solution is to buy things, improve yourself, depend on yourself to get through. And when we can't live up to everything we think we ought to be, or ought to have, or ought to accomplish, we feel like failures, we despair, we give up. Perhaps we succumb to depression and feel ourselves lost in a cycle of hopelessness, unsure of how to pull ourselves out. In this system hope doesn't make much sense, viewed as a naïve optimism.

Several years ago, when the Rev. William Sloane Coffin passed away, they replayed an interview with him on NPR in which he said, "Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world. So, if your heart is full of hope, you can be persistent when you can't be optimistic. You can keep the faith despite the evidence knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing. So while I'm not optimistic, I'm always hopeful."

So, hope is not some naïve optimism or wishful thinking. Hope belongs to God. According to Walter Breuggemann, hope is "a celebrative conviction that God will not quit until God has had God's full way in the world. And I suggest that that affirmation is an antidote to the deep despair that sees no way out of our present vexation. Such an affirmation is a warning about our own self-sufficiency, which imagines that in our own power we can have life on our own terms – now and in the time to come. Hope is an act that cedes out existence over to God, who is able to accomplish far more abundantly than we can ask or imagine."

As the writer of the book of Hebrews puts it, faith is connected to our ability to hope, to trust in God. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes about hope and suffering, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:18, 22-25)

“The text declares that authentic hope comes from a realistic view of the world. Now such a view of the world is only possible through faith. This is so because faith demands that we see the world with open eyes and yet discover God acting within it. Faith gives birth to hope, for hope, when it sees the world as it is and comprehends the presence and activity of God, dares to reach into the future believing that this same God of grace is already there preparing the future for us.” (Rev. Dr. Michael Foss)

To illustrate this point about hope and faith the writer of Hebrews reminds us of those who have gone before us in faith and retells the story of Abraham and Sarah, who in faith, followed God and trusted in God’s promises into a future yet unknown.

Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas recall in their book, *Resident Aliens*, a story of ministry that reflects this passage. A retired pastor they knew had been invited back to preach at the church, Shady Grove, that he had served for a time in the sixties. It was a turbulent time in the life of the church, dealing with issues of race and the Vietnam war.

“The Sunday of homecoming arrived. As the service progressed, the former pastor noted the differences that had taken place in the congregation. Twenty years before, the neighborhood was beginning to change in racial composition. Now, the surrounding community was 80 percent black, 20 percent white. Back then, he had told them if that they didn’t integrate the congregation and welcome black members, they would die. Perhaps their life together had proved him right. The congregation was now 20 percent black. The average age was much greater than he remembered, but the congregation was still alive with a new group of younger black members.

When he stood up to preach, he took as his text the Hebrews 11-12 account of faith as the story of various people, ‘By faith Abraham...By faith Noah,’ and so forth. He told them that the homecoming had, for him, proved the reality of the Hebrews’ definition of faith. Faith consists in each of us being a part of a pilgrimage, a stepping out, just like Abraham, just like Sarah.

He recalled the turbulent years that Shady Grove experienced in the sixties, the debate on whether to welcome all persons into the congregation. He recalled the person, who, at the board meeting, so eloquently testified to her belief in the necessity of the church to be a witness in a time of racism. He pointed to persons in the congregation who, in amazingly bold and creative ways, determined that Shady Grove would not only be open to all who came, but would actively go out and seek all people to become a part of their life together... ‘You know you really came together as a church,” he said. “You became better people than even you thought you could be. I confess that you were more of a church than I thought! It took courage, but you showed that you had it. I wish some of the people who have gone on to see their reward could see you now. I think they can see you now.’

These pioneers in faith who stepped out, basing their lives on something they could not see, taking their place in a journey whose destination had no exact determination, were our mothers and fathers in faith. In Abraham and Sarah, Cain and Abel, Noah and Shady Grove, what we have is not first of all heroic people, but a heroic God who refuses to abandon God’s creation, a God who keeps coming back, picking up the pieces, and continuing the story.”

We step forward in faith because God has prepared a place for us. And though we may not see that place, we do know the stories of our mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters in faith, who have gone before us.

I don’t know about you, but often when people think of faith, we think of faith as an intellectual assent to a set of belief statements, or answers to a catechism or Sunday School questions. “I believe in God, the Father Almighty...his Son Jesus Christ...Holy Spirit, the church, salvation...etc, etc.”

But as this passage from Hebrews puts it, faith is not simple a set of answers to the questions we have about God and the world around us, it is primarily about trusting in the One who created us, even when we don’t know the answers to the questions, even we don’t know where we are going, or what will happen next. We trust in God, because God has prepared a place for us. With the memory and witness

of those who have gone before, the writer of Hebrews calls on the faith community and us today as well to draw strength not from one's abilities but from the provision of God. As the writer of Hebrews at the beginning of chapter 12, "Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." We not only step forward and walk by faith, we run, and we don't give up – because God never gives up.

One of my favorite songwriters, wrote a song that beautifully illustrates the creative approach to stepping forward into the future,

Harry Connick Jr. "With Imagination (I'll Get There)"
I started with a dream
But came to a decision
I started with a dream
But now I have a mission
I have a goal
To see beyond my vision
With imagination
I'll get there

Friends, it is not our vision, but God's vision that matters. And by trusting in God, with imagination, faith and hope, we'll get there. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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