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 Sermon
 January 26th, Epiphany 3

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, well equipped for every good work.

That inspired and well-equipping Word of the LORD which forms a portion for our sermon text this morning comes to us from Hebrews chapter 11, the first 16 verses:

Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see. 2 For by this faith the ancients were commended in Scripture. 3 By faith we know that the universe was created by God's word, so that what is seen did not come from visible things. 4 By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice to God than Cain did. By faith he was commended in Scripture as righteous; God testified favorably about his gifts. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. 5 By faith Enoch was taken up, so that he would not experience death, and he was not found because God took him away. In fact, before he was taken away, he was commended in Scripture as one who "pleased God." 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God. Indeed, it is necessary for the one who approaches God to believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. 7 By faith Noah, when he was warned about things that had not been seen before, built an ark, in reverent fear, in order to save his family. By it he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that is by faith. 8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance, and he left without knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as a stranger in the Promised Land, as if it did not belong to him, dwelling in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith Abraham also received the ability to conceive children, even though Sarah herself was barren and he was past the normal age, because he considered him faithful who made the promise. 12 And so from one man, and he as good as dead, descendants were born as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand along the seashore. 13 One by one, all of these died in faith, without having received the things that were promised, but they saw and welcomed them from a distance. They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 Indeed, people who say things like that make it clear that they are looking for a land of their own. 15 And if they were remembering the land they had come from, they would have had an opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better land—a heavenly one. For that reason, God is not ashamed to be called their God, because he prepared a city for them.

This is the Word of The LORD!!! The congregation may be seated...

Mercy, Grace, and Peace ARE YOURS from your God and Father and from your Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. Dear fellow Redeemed...

What is faith? Sometimes, the Bible uses words and terms that need to be described for us to get to the full meaning. This happens for a variety of reasons. Perhaps some term is considered to be archaic now that wasn't when the Bible was translated. Sometimes, a word has such a deep and complex meaning that it requires a bit of background for us to arrive at the full intention. The Bible terms which require such an explanation that jump to my mind are words like "righteousness, justification, or atonement".

But one important biblical term that really does not require an extra description is the subject of our text this morning: FAITH. I think that most people know what faith is. Faith is a concept that is still very much used today. If you stopped anyone on the street, most would be able to offer you a definition of what faith is. It is believing. It is trusting in something. It is confidence in one thing or another.

Yes, faith is something that is easily described. But at the same time, it is not something that can be easily *EXPLAINED*. After all, faith is largely something that is personal, something that is subjective. I believe in one thing, you believe in another. If you followed up with that person you stopped on the street with the question "What do you have faith in?", they all would have an answer.

And that is why the faith that is being talked about here differs from just any faith. People can have faith in a number of different people or things. People may have faith in knowledge, their experience, their technology, their science (although people don't like to admit that this is actually a belief) or people may even have faith in their government. Faith can be found in many different places. So, where does your faith lie? Who do we put our faith in?

We are given many different examples of people who had faith in the Bible. This section of Hebrews is sometimes referred to as the "Heroes of Faith" section. Although the writer to the Hebrews brings up many different people throughout many different time periods, they all have one thing in common. They all had faith in the same thing, that is, they all had faith in the same God. They all trusted in God and His promises to them, and as a result they were all saved.

The whole point of this section is to encourage the people who have not yet seen the results of their faith. This is why this is so applicable to us here today. We too, have not yet seen the visible results of our faith. But that is what faith is! As the writer here states: **Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see.** The faith that we have been given by our God makes the impossible possible. It lets us know things which cannot be known, it lets us hope in that which cannot be reasonably hoped for, and it takes us places that we do not deserve to go! And so we pray: O LORD, SANCTIFY US BY YOUR TRUTH, YOUR WORD IS TRUTH, AMEN!

V3 By faith we know that the universe was created by God's word, so that what is seen did not come from visible things.

The way this verse starts out is the common refrain found throughout this text. BY FAITH...BY FAITH... Really, when it comes to religion, especially the one true religion, it all comes down to faith. There is only one way to believe any and/or all of God's Word. It is only BY FAITH!

What this writer starts his section with is a case in point to that very subject. In adult instruction courses (and in Bible class lately), one of the first things that gets brought up is creation. When studying what faith is, as the song says, "the very beginning is a very good place to start." What are the very first lines of the Bible? **In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)**

A common, existential and fundamental question that everyone has, is "Where did we come from?" Many people have many different answers to this question, but really it boils down to 1 of 2 options. It is either exactly like the book of Genesis says, (God created everything in the universe, including us, and it was good) or it was something else. The prevailing answer to this question from the world is called the big bang theory. While those who would tell you that they know how it started would like to defend this THEORY, it is just that. It is a theory. No one was there to observe it. Thus they cannot prove it.

Yet, the writer here tells us that we KNOW how it all started. There was someone who was there, namely, the One who created it all! People like to claim they know how it really started, but only the One who Created it truly observed it. God reminds man, just like He reminded the man named Job, **“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6 To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, 7 When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy?(Job 38:4-7)**

We KNOW that the beginning is exactly like God said it was. Can we prove it? While there is evidence that supports the fact that the world didn't evolve slowly over billions of years, we cannot prove creation. And yet, we know it to be true. Just exactly how can we know such a thing? Repeat the refrain: BY FAITH!

Before the writer gets into his illustration of faith, he starts out by plainly stating, **Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see.** Everything that he will bring up was not something we could have seen for ourselves. We were not there in any of the cases he will bring up, yet we know that they are true. We know of their genuineness because, again repeat the refrain: BY FAITH!

The writer goes on to mention specific examples of people who had this great faith. There are a handful of individuals mentioned in this text, but he goes on to mention more. Eventually, he concludes that he could go on, but time would fail him to mention them all.

These were all heroes of faith. They all believed in something that could not be seen, yet they were all sure in the hope that faith provided. Abel offered a worthy sacrifice to God, and by faith it was accepted. Enoch lived a righteous life before God, and by faith he was taken by God and did not die. Noah, by faith built an ark and saved his family and the world from the floodwaters. They all lived by faith and were declared righteous by that faith. They were not

righteous because of themselves. Rather, they were righteous because of the righteous One in whom they put their faith.

And then we have the subject of the man named Abraham. He too, just like the other heroes of faith, hoped for something which could not be reasonably hoped for. He hoped for something that was promised to him, even though he could not see it or even see how it was possible at all.

Faith has been explained like this: What if I came to you and said, “I will give some money. You can either have 10 \$1 bills today or in 2 weeks you can have 10 \$100 bills.” You would have to be ridiculous to take the \$10 now as opposed to \$1,000 14 days from now. It is a bit of a stretch to compare faith, something so immensely valuable with such a meager sum of money. But the point is accurate. We do not see the returns of our faith, at least not in this life. But we will once we are delivered from this place.

But, to go back to that picture of choosing between \$10 now or \$1,000 later, that situation would probably make you evaluate some things. It would make you evaluate who it was who was giving you the offer. If I had flaked out of such agreements in the past, or if I had a history of being dishonest to you, you might be tempted to take the quick cash now. After all, there is no guarantee that I would even show up to give you the larger sum later, especially if I had an untrustworthy past. But then again, if I had always done what I said I would do, wouldn't you expect that I would continue to be honest and my offer was genuine?

Abraham was offered a gracious gift. Yet, it took faith to believe it! **11 By faith Abraham also received the ability to conceive children, even though Sarah herself was barren and he was past the normal age, because he considered him faithful who made the promise. 12 And so from one man, and he as good as dead, descendants were born as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand along the seashore.**

Earlier in Abraham's life, God had promised him that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him. Yet, it was already late in his life. He and his wife

Sarah were well beyond their childbearing years. Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 80. It would be very unreasonable for Abraham and Sarah to hope for a son to be born to them so late in life. Yet, God had promised them both a Son and heir. God told Abraham that his descendants would be like the grains of sand on the seashore and like the stars in the heavens. So numerous would his descendants be that they would be impossible for a human to number.

Yet, here was this aged couple. What were they to trust? Were they supposed to trust God and His promises? Or were they supposed to trust common sense? That's the great thing about faith, it allows us to believe the impossible! It's like Jesus said to His disciples in our Gospel reading this morning: **"If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. (Luke 17:6)**

What is the greatest impossibility that faith allows us to believe? There are some great deeds recorded in Holy Scripture that are truly unbelievable. The parting of the Red Sea. The deliverance from the 185,000 Assyrians. The feeding of the 5,000. These are all great miracles. But they do have much personal meaning to you specifically. As I said before, faith is a personal thing. So what is the most impossible thing that your faith can let you believe?

Well, how about the fact that you have been saved and ransomed from sin? How about the fact that the Almighty and all-powerful God loved YOU so much that He came down to this earth to die for YOU? How about the fact that despite being the wretched sinners and lost causes that we are, now we get the hope of inheritance of eternal life? This shouldn't be our hope. We are all so sinful, there is no way we could ever expect to receive such a blessing for the way that we have lived our lives... Except for the fact that God declares it to us!!! It was impossible for 100-year-old Abraham and 80-year-old Sarah to have a son. But that is exactly what happened. Isaac was born, and that promise that God made Abraham proved to be true! That faithful promise made to Abraham is one that we share in as well! God declared it through the

Apostle Paul: **There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:28-29)** We are now spiritual sons of Abraham, because his Descendant, Jesus Christ, was born and died for you! Now, we get to hope in that which cannot be reasonably hoped for, an inheritance of salvation!

Faith also takes us places where we do not deserve to be. Why did Abraham believe that he and his wife would have a son even though they were so old? Again repeat the refrain: BY FAITH! This faith was also one that Abraham knew was valid because of the source. God had been faithful earlier in his life, and Abraham knew that He would be again! **8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance, and he left without knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as a stranger in the Promised Land, as if it did not belong to him, dwelling in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**

To highlight Abraham's faith, if you would, please allow an experience of mine to compare to it. About 4 years ago, I was a senior in Seminary, and my future was also uncertain. I was scheduled to graduate in the spring, but I did not know where I was going. I was not sure if there would be a call available for me when I would be done with school. My wife and I were expecting our first child, and I didn't know what part of the nation I would live in or what my prospects would be. It was all foggy. But God knew. He knew that Ascension would call me, love and support me and my family, and give us a home. And that is exactly what happened. I was stressed out about an unknown future. But my future was never unknown to God!

To a much greater degree, Abraham went through a similar thing. This was something we looked at in Bible class last week. Abram (as he was called then) was living in Ur. He and his family migrated to Haran.

It was there that the LORD called Abram and told him: **“Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you. 2 I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:1-2)** Notice, God didn’t tell Abram where to go, only to go to a land that God would show him. His future was foggy, and all he had to go on was a promise that was not full of details. He had no guarantee. All he knew was he was to go, and God would bless him. He had no guarantee, that is other than the guarantee of the LORD. But whose guarantee could mean more than His? So Abram did as he was told. How? Again repeat the refrain: BY FAITH!

This brings us back full circle. How do we know that Abraham was faithful? How do we know that everything this text says is true? How do we know that God created the world? How do we know that all these deeds by these heroes of faith are accurate? BY FAITH!

If you would get into a debate with someone over the things the Bible says, they would probably ask you similar questions, *“HOW do you KNOW?”* But when you say you believe what the Bible says, and they then ask why, faith is not a good enough answer for them. They would negatively call what we have “blind faith”. But that term could not be farther from the truth. The real truth is that faith is the only real way one can truly see!

If you believe anything other than the Bible, then you are placing your trust in man-made sources instead of God. These sources would claim to have guarantees. They would claim to have proof. They don’t, just theories and ideas. God gives us real proof because He gives us His Word. His Word made the world and redeemed it. It is by His word that this faith comes about in the first place. And it is only by faith that we can come to God! **6 And without faith it is impossible to please God. Indeed, it is necessary for the one who approaches God to believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.**

Faith is not blind, rather it is the only way we can go anywhere good! The fact of the matter is that Faith

takes us places! It takes us to our neighbors, to tell them of the great love with which God loves us and them. Faith takes us to Jesus, who in turn takes us to the Father. Faith takes us out of this state of deadness in sins into the eternal life found in the washing and regeneration of the Word! And finally, faith will take us out of our graves and bring us to the heavenly country!

13 One by one, all of these died in faith, without having received the things that were promised, but they saw and welcomed them from a distance. They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 Indeed, people who say things like that make it clear that they are looking for a land of their own. 15 And if they were remembering the land they had come from, they would have had an opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better land—a heavenly one. For that reason, God is not ashamed to be called their God, because he prepared a city for them.

Just like God had the promised land of Canaan prepared for Abraham, so too do we have the promised land of heaven to look forward to. Why would we return to the land we came from? We have a much better land prepared for us! God has built us a city, a restored paradise, where we will one day go to. Just like these heroes of faith, we too see the promise God makes to us and we welcome it from a distance. We know, by faith, that death is not the end for us. Faith takes us out of our graves! God is not the God of the dead, but of the living! He **IS** the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because He **IS**, so too are you!

It all comes down to faith. You either have faith in God or you don’t. Faith allows us to be Christians and it takes us to God Himself! Faith gives us something we could never possess on our own, salvation! Faith does not require an explanation or a guarantee, faith is guaranteed! Faith in Jesus Christ our savior is a guarantee that we are going to heaven! Faith is the reason we can get out of bed every day, and it is the reason we will one day get out of the grave and inherit heaven! How do we know all these impossibilities are

our reality? Again repeat the refrain: BY FAITH!
Amen!