

11th Sunday after Pentecost August 8, 2010 Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

“Summertime and the livin’ is easy.” Or so George Gershwin would have us believe. Time to kick back, relax, move a little slower, work less, play more. And maybe we take advantage of the longer summer days to do that, or at least grab some vacation time to give ourselves a break. But for many people today, livin’ is not so easy. In fact, life is difficult and often overwhelming.

There are many reasons this is so, and I am sure we could each name at least one thing that is a challenge, if not a major difficulty. Just ask me about my landlady. But then there are the “big issues” that affect all of us: nine years of war, a worldwide economic crisis, and ongoing environmental devastation. These issues are like large, destructive waves crashing around us, perhaps inside us as well, threatening to wash away hope and leave us with the bitter taste of despair. I know that that is true for me, especially around the environmental crisis. The oil well may be capped, but the damage it - and other disasters - has done is incalculable. I feel hopeless.

But I recently read an article that offered a different perspective on despair. It’s called *In These Times* and author Bob Sitze writes: “Despair-avoidance is one of the swamps where your hope might get mired. This attitude is based on the idea that any negative feelings - despair being one of them - destroy any possibility of acting in a hopeful way. In this frame of mind, you might consider hope and despair to be complete opposites of each other. But what if hope is never far from despair? What if, to be hopeful, you need sometimes to admit your despair? When you live at the edges between hope and despair, you don't try to dodge despair. Instead, you see this situation as an opportunity to grow stronger, bolder, or wiser. To strengthen hope, you take the risk that profound hopefulness might suddenly teeter in the direction of deepening despair. You ferret out opportunities from what appears hopeless. You tilt toward hope even as you acknowledge the presence and power of despair. And you depend on the Spirit to hold you safely at the edges of life.”

I don't know about you, but I find these words comforting. And when this reading from Hebrews came up, I heard it in a new way. The words to the Hebrews were written to an early Christian community that was struggling (we don't know with what, maybe persecution, marginalization, fear), and being encouraged to not fall into despair. The message is timeless. For those who are finding these times to be overwhelming, this first-century sermon we call Hebrews is just as current today as it was then: “Now faith is the assurance of all that is hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

“The assurance of all that is hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” - this is what the fundamentalist atheists cannot accept. If something can't be experienced with our senses, if there is no empirical evidence – it cannot exist. There is no “by faith” or “conviction of things not seen.”

But to be fair (and honest), we often have a hard time with this too. Remember the song from the 60s:

*People get ready, there's a train a comin'. You don't need no baggage, you just get on board.
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'. Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.*

The song assures us of the same thing as the author of Hebrews: *All you need is faith*. But what is faith anyway? It's one of those “big” religious words we use all the time, but what do we mean when we say 'have faith,' especially if we do not define it as subscribing to a particular set of beliefs or creeds?

This chapter from Hebrews is interesting in that the word 'faith' occurs 24 times in this chapter alone, more than in any other NT book. That helps because, by repeating it so often, we get a vivid picture of what the author intends. In this case, what’s conveyed by the word 'faith' could more accurately be called 'faithfulness' – meaning the quality of life that enables us to both persevere even in the midst of

difficult circumstances and to step out into the unknown with courage. Faithfulness enables us to live according to a vision of the realities of God and God's purposes - even though this vision is not yet present or experienced by any of our senses. But - as Jesus says in the gospel: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Abba's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." The knowledge of this good pleasure of God is what empowers us to move into the future with hope.

But let us not be naïve or sentimental about this. Bob Sitze again: "Finding hope isn't necessarily a trip through a field of posies. Along the way you're likely to run into squishy bogs that slow down your exploration for hope. Like the rest of a godly life, hope-seeking is likely to include moments when you suddenly realize that what you're doing is more difficult than you first imagined. Hope can get dinged and scratched like a car door in a parking lot." How true, how true.

But going back to what he wrote about tilting toward hope even as you acknowledge the presence and power of despair and depending on the Spirit to hold you safely at the edges of life: I believe the writer of Hebrews would call this living by faith, which is not passive, wishful thinking or flimsy daydreaming. Faith is the ground on which we stand and to which we hold fast. But that grounding also points us toward the future and gives us courage to move forward, to launch out into the unknown - like Abraham and Sarah, those paragons of faithfulness, the patriarch and matriarch of our faithfulness.

We are grounded in the same promise given to Sarah and Abraham, to Moses, Isaiah, Mary, to all the biblical witnesses. We are grounded in their stories. And in the stories of the saints of our own lives: parents or grandparents, Sunday school teachers, pastors, friends. We are also grounded in our stories, as we remember times when hope was fulfilled, when the impossible became possible, when despair was lifted. A large part of faith is this holy remembering and holding fast to the promise of God's faithfulness to us.

On this bedrock of memory, the writer to the Hebrews can exhort that faith community (as well as ours today) to draw strength not from our own abilities but from God's providence. Life comes from God, and life belongs to God. Just as barrenness, for Sarah and Abraham, was a sign of hopelessness, a mark of having no future, then the new life they experience in the birth of Isaac can be seen as a metaphor for the opening up of a future and the generation of an impossible possibility by the miraculous presence of God.

Another way of thinking about faithfulness is as active obedience – that movement out into the future with trust and confidence. Bob Sitze calls it "ferreting out opportunities from what appears hopeless." He says, "The collapse of the world isn't going to be stopped or slowed by well-meaning people who only know about hope or who only think hopefully. Hope motivates; the value of hope is in the actions it engenders."

You might be wondering about the button I'm wearing today. I got it from Interfaith Power and Light because I signed on as a 'Climate Convert.' As part of their 'Religious Response to Global Warming,' Interfaith Power and Light has designated this 'Visibility Weekend.' Their initial statement says: In the midst of disaster, the Senate announced last week it will not take up a comprehensive clean energy and climate bill before the August recess. So we're asking you to join thousands of religious leaders and people of faith across the country in taking a stand as a Climate Convert during our visibility weekend — August 6 - 8. <http://climateconvert.org>

By becoming a 'Climate Convert' I received, along with the button, this response: "Right now, we have a chance to pass a strong climate bill. And we need it more than ever. We've been pushing for safer, clean energy alternatives for years, and for a long time it seemed like no one was listening.

But because of the tragic coal mining tragedy in West Virginia and the gulf oil spill catastrophe, the world is finally waking up to our pressing need for consequences of inaction. You and I can make a difference in this fight. Join me in contacting your senators today to act on climate change. Now is the time for people of faith to push our elected officials strengthen this legislation, and protect all of Creation. Thanks for standing with me today.”

It may seem like a piddly little thing to do. But I believe that small steps are the core actions from which hopeful change is created. And this might not be your ‘thing.’ But it is important to find your ‘thing.’

In a book called *Blessed Unrest*, Paul Hawken, an environmentalist and social activist, recounts scores of anecdotes about the far-reaching results of seemingly small, hope-filled actions. His stories of how one idea sparks accumulated potential, how what's small becomes what's big, what's ordinary becomes what's extraordinary, what's invisible becomes what's hard to ignore – strengthen me in my faith, which is “the assurance of all that is hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

I close with this wonderful exposition on this by Frederick Buechner: "By faith we understand, if we are to understand it at all, that the madness and lostness we see all around us and within us are not the last truth about the world but only the next to the last truth Faith is the eye of the heart, and by faith we see deep down beneath the face of things – by faith we struggle against all odds to be able to see – that the world is God's creation even so. It is God who made us and not we ourselves; we are made out of God's peace to live in peace, out of God's light to dwell in light, out of God's love to be above all things loved and loving. That is the last truth about the world."

So - *People get ready, there's a train a comin'. You don't need no baggage, you just get on board. All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'. Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.*

Amen

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Isaiah is without doubt the greatest of Israel's prophets, surviving one of the stormiest periods of Judean history. Although believed to belong to the royal court, he vehemently condemned the injustices of his time. In this passage he thunders against the ruling classes, likening them to the rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah. The reference to those cities has a mistaken association with homosexuality. The issue was really corruption and injustice.

The vision of Isaiah Ben-Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, rulers of Judah.

Hear the word of YHWH, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the command of YHWH, you people of Gomorrah!

“These interminable sacrifices of yours: what are they to me?” says YHWH.

“I am fed up with burnt offerings of rams and the fat of calves; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats.

When you come to present yourselves before me, who asked you to trample over my courts?

Don't bring any more of your useless offerings to me – their incense fills me with loathing.

New moons, Sabbaths, assemblies – I cannot endure another festival of injustice!

Your new moons and your pilgrimages

I despise with all my soul.

They are wearisome to me; I am tired of bearing them.

When you open up your hands in prayer,

I turn my eyes away from you.

You may heap prayer upon prayer, but I will not hear them -
your hands are covered with blood!

Wash! Clean yourselves!

Get your injustice out of my sight!

Cease to do evil,

and learn to do good!

Search for justice and help the oppressed!
Protect those who are orphaned,
and plead the case for those who are widowed!
Come now! Let's look at the choices before you,"
says YHWH.
"Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow.
Though they are red as crimson, they shall be like fleece.
If you are willing to obey,
you will eat the best that the land has to offer –
but if you persist in rebellion,
the sword will consume you instead!"
The mouth of YHWH has spoken.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

The word faith is found 24 times in Hebrews 11 alone, and more than in any other book in the New Testament. What the word means for the unknown author is closer to the meaning of faithfulness. It speaks of faith as active obedience. It is that characteristic of the Christian life that enables one both to persevere even in the midst of difficult circumstances and to step out into the unknown with the courage to live in a risk and vigorous way.

Now faith is the assurance of all that is hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abraham and Sarah obeyed when they were called, and set out for a place that they were to receive as an inheritance; and they set out, not knowing where they were going.

By faith they lived in the promised land as resident aliens, living in tents with their children and grandchildren, who were heirs of the same promise - for they were looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

By faith, Sarah received the ability to conceive, even though she was past child-bearing age, for she thought that the One who had made the promise was worthy of trust. As a result of this trust, there came forth from one woman and one man, themselves as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands of the seashore.

All of them died in faith. They did not obtain what had been promised, but saw and welcomed it from afar. By acknowledging themselves to be strangers and exiles on the earth, they showed that they were looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country from which they had come, they would have been able to return. But they were searching for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; and indeed, has prepared a city for them.

Luke 12:32-40

The eschatological aspect to this story reverses the ordinary state of human affairs. The servants await the owner to come home from a wedding banquet, possibly through all three night watches. When he

does come and they respond to his knock at the door, he will sit them down to a feast and serve them himself. That is a total reversal of the ordinary state of affairs. Obviously, it referred to the messianic banquet at the end of the age, a common feature of Jewish eschatology

"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Abba's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

"Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, treasures that won't fail you, in heaven, where thieves can't steal and moths can't destroy. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"Be dressed and ready, and keep your lamps lit. Be like the household servants awaiting the owner's return from a wedding, so that when the owner arrives and knocks, you'll open the door without delay. It will go well with those servants whom the owner finds awake upon returning. I tell you, the owner will put on an apron, seat them at table and proceed to wait on them. Should the owner happen to come at midnight or before sunrise and find them prepared, it will go well with them.

"But know this: no homeowner who knew when a thief was coming would have let the thief break in! So be on guard – the Promised One will come when least expected."