

Proper 14C – “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Hebrews 11.1

I have not been with you all that long but I hope that I have impressed upon you the things that I believe are fundamental to the Christian faith, the attainment of everlasting salvation and the living of holy and transformed lives. I hope that you have heard me say, more than once, that the study and even the memorization of Scripture, God’s own word to us, was an imperative part of our growth in grace. I believe that this is true for a number of reasons. It is not always the case that you will find yourself in possession of your Bible. When someone asks you to give a reason for your faith could you do better than, “Because my momma told me so”? When a moment of joy or a prayer is answered, do you have the words of God upon your lips? When there is someone who suffers, can you give them comfort? But more than just a solution when not having a Bible handy, we should have God’s own word set to memory because it is a guard against temptation and the Tempter. It is when we are least prepared to fend off attacks from our enemies that we are most prone to fall. While the Devil is alive and active in the midst of Divine Service or at Sunday

School, it is when we stand in the checkout line at the grocery store staring at the latest issue of the National Enquirer or Us magazine, or when our neighbors are being ugly to us that our defenses are low and we are prone to sin. We must have the Word of God at the ready, a two edged sword in our hands to dispense with the Enemy and his forces. But more than all these, we must have the very words of Almighty God in our hearts and souls and minds because we are called as Christians to become one with God, the perfect Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. As a secular thinker of the 20th century said, “We are what we eat”. And we are to eat God’s word. Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Apostle John were given heavenly books of the Lord’s prophetic word to consume and then to preach. They took it in themselves and became the agents of God to his people and to his world. We too, must ingest and digest God’s word so that we become like him, speak like him, act like him. For he said to the Israelites, “Be holy, even as I am holy”.

But what Scriptures shall we learn? Has St. Paul not said, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God

may be complete, equipped for every good work”? Yes it is. We must set to memory words that comfort, exhort, build up, and defend against error. We must learn passages that lead us in worship such as the Psalms. We must learn passages that remind of us of God’s saving acts in his Son Jesus, like John 3.16. And we must learn passages that fill out our understanding of words that we use too casually. They are often called “churchy” words because we only use them around the Church. Faith is one of those words. We have a passage before us this morning that speaks to faith. We should impress this passage upon our memories.

The writer to the Hebrews says that, “Faith is the assurance or substance of things hoped for, the conviction or evidence of things that we cannot or do not presently see”. To understand this better let us ask, “What is faith?” To begin with, faith is an anchor for our ship in the storms of life. The Hebrew’s faith is the answer to the problem that they were currently suffering. They were enduring persecution. They had been doing so a very long time. They were getting tired of it. When they had first been converted to believe that Jesus was the true King, they had gladly joined other Christians in their sufferings. They

had visited them in prison, and had rejoiced when their pagan neighbors had come and stolen their possessions because they as Christians were outlaws. They rejoiced because they were convinced by the message that had been preached to them about the new King Jesus. If there was a new King there must be a new kingdom. The old kingdom was passing away and they expected a kingdom whose glories would eclipse their meager possessions in this present world. They looked forward in hope. But now they were just tired. There are only so many beatings a man can take. They had begun to doubt. But the apostle writing the letter exhorts them to endurance. You have to get to the end to receive the prize. The reward doesn't come to the fastest in this race. The reward comes to the one who finishes the race. So the apostle concludes, "We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen". Faith is an anchor.

But faith is not only our anchor of endurance in times of great temptation and turmoil, but faith is also our way to God himself. "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so

that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.” First of all we should understand that faith brings us to the knowledge of the true God. It is the God who has made all things in heaven and earth, things visible and invisible. This God is hidden from our sight because he is pure spirit and does not have a body like we do. Because of this, we are tempted to conclude that God does not exist. This goes against the evidence. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows forth his handiwork”, writes the Psalmist. It is only through the work of faith in our minds that we understand that the world was created and is upheld to this very day by the mighty hand of God.

But what kind of God is this creative and sustaining God? Faith shows him to be a God that cannot only be known, but is the source and object of our love and devotion. If this God was not the source of all life and all goodness then we would be justified in ignoring him or positively fearing him. But it is through faith that the vast love of God comes to our view. We see his care for Adam and Eve even after their rebellion against him. We hear his promises made to the patriarchs and the people of Israel by the mouth of the prophets. We understand

his gracious work in sending his Son to be born of a virgin. We hear his words on Jesus' lips when he says, "Come unto me all ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." We see the Son die for our sins and rise that we might have eternal life. We receive the great good gift of the Holy Ghost and adoption as sons and heirs of the Kingdom. Yes, it is the true God that we know by faith. But it must be the true God that we CLING TO by faith.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Paul told the Christians in Rome that people don't hope for things that they see and possess already. That isn't hope and it isn't faith. We wait expectantly in faith for things that we don't see and don't have already with patience. What then is the great enemy of faith? Worldly contentment and ease. This is not to say that we can ever be free from all concerns of this world. We must eat. We must have shelter. We must care for our families and others who depend upon us. We must employ the talents that God has placed in our stewardship so that we may give him a kingly profit on the day of his return. But all these are a far cry to our neighbors who live for nothing more than consumption and contentment. Their god is their

belly, and their minds are set on earthly things. But when our minds are changed by the gracious arrival of faith our perspective changes. What is the temporal and corruptible world in comparison to one that is magnificent in its perfection and permanence? Nothing. What is a shadow in comparison to the object that casts the shadow? Nothing. So by faith we see the true nature of reality. We are able to discern the dream from the waking. By faith we relinquish our citizenship in this dying world to confirm our place in the new heavens and the new earth.

So let us then feed upon the word of God, sure in that faith that is our anchor in time of need and guide to the true God that has love us and has saved us. Let us, with St. Paul, walk by faith and not by sight. Even now our world calls out to us to give up faith and hope. The economic woes, foreign wars, and domestic unrest tempt us to doubt. Where shall our next meal come from? What will become of our nation and our home? Who is in charge here anyway? Faith calls us to greater service not disinterest. Faith calls the Christian to action not to indifference. No, faith is the evidence that God is in our very midst working to defeat evil and to bring to fulfillment his plan to redeem

the world. Let us then walk faithfully, for we are not those who shrink back, but those who have faith and keep their souls.