

FAITH AND FAITHING  
HEBREWS 11:1-3, 8-10; LUKE 12:22-31  
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Do you consider yourself a person of faith? Do you believe in the Christian faith? Do you have faith in God? As you can see, the word "faith" has several different meanings. Faith is a word rich in meaning, and because it is so varied, when your definition is too narrow, you might find yourself missing a deep experience. For example, when I was a child there were only three kinds of ice cream: vanilla, strawberry and chocolate. If I hadn't expanded my conception of ice cream flavors over the years and only selected ice cream from among three flavors, think of the rich ice cream experiences I would be missing. I could be missing pecan praline, pumpkin, licorice and bubble gum ice cream! Have they made sauerkraut ice cream yet?

To many people, faith means the acceptance of ideas or propositions that are not readily proved by evidence, like a belief in the existence of God. The existence of God is not provable by scientific research, so some doubt God's existence. Woody Allen once said that he would believe in God if only God would give him a clear sign--like making a large deposit in his name at a Swiss bank. On the other hand, some have discovered the benefits of having faith in God's existence. A magazine cartoon has two young people working side by side at an assembly line and one remarks to the other, "I used to be an atheist until I learned that they don't have any holidays."

Believing in the existence of God is a matter of accepting an intellectual proposition without sufficient evidence; but, if that is the extent of your faith, you are missing a great deal. There are more flavors of ice cream than vanilla, strawberry and chocolate. A minister was making funeral plans with the widow of the deceased. The man had not been a Christian, but his wife, eager to prove her husband's goodness, exclaimed, "Oh, Henry was a believer. He believed that there is a God." I wonder how she would have felt if at some point in their marriage, she had asked Henry, "Henry, do you believe in me?" and he had answered, "Yes, dear, I believe that you exist!" Christian faith is more than an intellectual belief in the existence of God.

How does the Bible define faith? It might be helpful to manufacture a verb form of faith, and differentiate between faith and faithing. Faith as a noun often means a body of belief statements, like the Apostles' Creed, to which believers subscribe. But faith, in the biblical sense, is actually faithing. Faithing implies action, doing. Faith in the Bible is not merely belief or intellectual assent; it includes also the will and the feelings.

The best known definition of faith in the Bible was read in the Epistle lesson this morning, Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith is future-oriented, and is inseparable from hope. The context of this verse is important. The letter to the Hebrews is a letter of encouragement that was written to Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their faith, some of them facing execution. The author is encouraging them to hold steadfast. He is pointing them to the future realization of God's promises. God will eventually triumph. Their hope is in the future triumph of God.

Now, faithing is not content-centered. What is believed about the future triumph of God is not faith. Faith in this verse is not an intellectual set of beliefs about what the kingdom of God will eventually look like. What is believed about the future realization of God's kingdom is the content of hope.

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Faith in this verse is what enables the persecuted Christians to trust in the hope of eventual triumph. Faith is what makes hope operative. Faith is what enables the persecuted Christians to continue their witness. Faith is what sustains them when they are persecuted.

The Revised Standard Version, from which the lesson this morning was read, uses the words "assurance" and "conviction." "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith means assurance and conviction. The Jerusalem Bible translates 11:1, "Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of the realities that at present remain unseen." Faith is the guarantee, the earnest money, of the eventual realization of the kingdom of God. The Good News Version translates 11:1, "To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see."

The author of Hebrews does not define faith by using head-words like "belief," but by using heart-words, feeling-words, like "assurance, conviction, guarantee, be sure of, and to be certain of." These words apply to the whole person, not just the mind. These words imply that action will follow. When you have assurance and conviction, then you can act, then you can persist, then you can live.

In this morning's Gospel lesson, Jesus told the disciples they were anxious because they had little faith. Jesus said,

"Don't worry about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass which is alive in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!

Faith is more than an intellectual assent to belief statements. Faith is more than believing in the existence of God. Faithing is to trust in God, to trust God with your life, to trust God for the basic necessities of life, to trust that the life God has given you to live is good.

Faithing involves risk. There is the risk that God is not good, that life is not essentially good. There is a personal risk. What if God really doesn't love me? What if I am no good? What if I am really not wanted or needed by anyone? Do my parents really love me? Does my spouse really love me? Lots of people have been hurt in their relationships. They have been let down, rejected, humiliated, and embarrassed. Some don't want to take any more chances. They don't dare to love again. They don't risk anymore, and have retreated into themselves, into a shell, feeling unloved and unwanted. Not even God could love me, they feel. To have faith, to be faithing, is to stick your neck out, to take a chance, to risk. To have faith in God means to trust God with your life, to trust that God is good, to trust that God's creation is

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good, especially God's creation of you. It takes courage to risk. Faithing requires courage. Faithing is no place for cowards.

Several years ago I composed a story to illustrate faith. Many of you have heard it before, but it can be retold every few years. Picture a tree and a little boy. The boy confidently climbs the tree. He likes to feel the wind blowing through his hair. He feels free. He crawls bravely out on a limb about nine feet from the ground, looks up, looks around, looks down, and freezes! He can't back up. He can't go forward. He can't jump off, and he certainly isn't going to climb further up. There he sits, petrified, inadequate, hopeless. Then, along comes a neighbor, surveys the situation, walks under the limb and calls to the boy, "Jump, I'll catch you." Now the boy has a choice.

Does the man exist? Yes, the boy has the faith that the man exists. The boy believes that the man is standing down there with outstretched arms. Perhaps, he even believes that the man is capable of catching him, and strong enough to hold him. He has intellectual faith, but the intellectual belief in the existence of the man, even the intellectual belief in the power and strength of the man, will not get the boy out of the tree.

The boy can recite a creed. He can say, "I believe you are John Smith. I believe you are a good man and a strong man. I believe you have a son. In fact, I know your son, Albert. He goes to school with me; we are friends. Because I know Albert, I believe that you are a good father and that you will help little boys." He can recite a creed, as we recited the Apostles' Creed this morning, but reciting a creed, believing in a series of faith statements, will not get him out of the tree!

He can engage the man in theological dialogue. Was the world created in seven days or did it evolve? Was there really an Adam and an Eve? Was Jesus really born of a virgin? Which denomination has the most truth? He can discuss, think, ponder, philosophize, theologize, and even study the Bible, but that will not get him out of the tree!

Or, he may ponder the personal consequences of jumping. What if I miss the man's arms? What if he drops me? Have my parents paid the insurance? What if I break a leg? What if people laugh at me? Will all the kids tease me because I had to be caught, because I couldn't climb back down the tree by myself? He can calculate the risks involved, but it will not get him out of the tree!

He won't get out of the tree (and notice, in my little story, there are no ladders, fire departments, or miracles) until he puts his belief in the existence and strength of the man into action, throws caution to the wind, accepts the risks, trusts the man with his very life, lets go of the limb, and leaps into the outstretched arms of the loving, kind, strong neighbor. Faithing is the trusting of God with your very life. Faithing takes risk and courage.

An eighteen-year-old young man committed suicide. A reporter asked his father, Herbert W. Chilstrom, bishop of the Minnesota Synod, Lutheran Church in America, how he coped with such a tragedy. The bishop replied,  
Christians are not known for giving up. History shows that

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Christians are at their best when everything else is at its worst. When others have given up, it is the Christians who say: We will find a way through the darkness....There is one pilgrimage that all Christians can take together; that pilgrimage is to Jerusalem, to the foot of the cross and the door of the empty tomb. Here we can stand, grasping the hands of one another and testifying to the world with one voice. We believe that God still loves the world. We believe that the future is in God's hands. And because we believe, we will work and pray---and we will have hope.

Faithing is the courage to accept the risk and trust God with your life, trust that God loves you, trust that the future is in God's hands, trust that the kingdom of God will eventually triumph. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."