

*"Things Not Seen"*  
by  
The Rev. Elizabeth K. Lovell  
of  
**Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church**  
Bryn Mawr, PA

*Readings: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16*  
*Genesis 17:1-8*

August 8, 2010

I spent yesterday in Fairmount park playing several games in the final tournament of my summer ultimate Frisbee league. Between games, I found myself sitting on the grass with two five year olds, Marley and Sabina , twin daughters of my teammates. Throughout the summer they have been something like our team mascots, often leading the pregame cheer, and always looking for playmates on the sidelines. Yesterday was no exception. After only a few sips from my water bottle, Marley asked "do you want to play 'I Spy'?" I of course agreed, and was told that I was to go first. "I spy . . . something pink." "No, not my water bottle." "No, not that woman's shirt." "Yes, you got it, it's Sabina's pink necklace." Now it was

Marley's turn. "I spy . . . something blue." "Is it the sky?" "Noooo." "Is it the umbrella?" "No, silly." Sabina and I looked around, and then she saw it. "Is it the other team's blue shirts?" "Yes! There are a lot of them! Whose turn is it now?"

I imagine that for many of you, it's been a while since your last game of I Spy, but you get the idea of how it goes. To be successful in this game, you have to pay attention to the world around you. You use keen skills of observation to deduce what the other person has spied. Even young children are taught to look around, and pay attention.

English philosopher John Locke is quoted as saying, "nothing is in the understanding, which was not first perceived by some of the senses." For Locke, and others during the Enlightenment, reason was celebrated. Intellectual inquiry was heightened, and people searched for the answers. We are people who like to see things firsthand. It's not enough to hear about it – we want to see it, touch it, have the proof. Like children playing "I Spy," we pay attention to what our senses can observe. We notice sights, sounds, smells, and cling to that which we can touch.

No wonder we run into trouble with understanding faith. It's not exactly something tangible, that we can dissect and put under a microscope. It's not even something that we can put in a display case in a museum for countless viewers. Our text from Hebrews lays it out from the very beginning - "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." From the get go, we are challenged to look beyond what we can visibly observe, and instead trust in something more – those things not seen.

The opening verse of this chapter sketches two dimensions of faith or faithfulness that the writer will then develop in detail. In the first part of this definition, faith is linked to hope. The Greek word for assurance, *hypostatis*, connects with our own subjective beliefs, and often appears alongside both faith and hope throughout scripture. B.W. Johnson suggests that here this word assurance should be seen as "stand under, that is to be a foundation. Faith is the foundation on which all our hopes for the future are built." Because of faith, our hope is no flimsy dreaming; it has

substance and reality. Faith provides a ground to which we may hold fast. It becomes our orientation to the world.

The connection between faith and hope makes sense, really. We all have hopes, dreams, desires, and in faith often turn to God. We pray for our selves, family and friends, the world, all in the hopes that God will respond. Faith becomes a sort of letting go, giving way into hope, receiving the assurance of God's love; knowing that God is with us.

How would you define faith? Countless individuals have tried to wrap their heads around it. Not surprisingly, John Calvin had a lot to say on the matter. In fact, he devotes more words in his famous *Institutes* to the subject of faith than any other topic. For Calvin, faith is "the firm knowledge of God's benevolence towards us," the certainty and conviction that God cares about us all. In the midst of all of the questions, the wondering and the wandering, Calvin goes back to the foundation of faith – that God is God.

In the 1960s, Curtis Mayfield offers an interesting definition. He sings, "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."

Trust in God . . . all you need is faith . . . don't worry about anything, God's got it covered, just have faith . . . is this the only message we hear in Hebrews? It is certainly a compelling one, reminding us that we have been given the freedom to leave all of the driving up to God. Yet I wonder, are we really called to set aside our reason, our need for the proof, and simply "have faith"? After all, what happens when we can't quite see the results? When our prayers seem like they aren't enough, when God's response seems to have gotten lost in the mail, and our hope begins to wane? It's hard to follow God, to have faith, when we aren't quite sure where God is leading. We may hear the first part of the definition from Hebrews, and the attempts of others and ourselves to define faith, and wonder, yes, but what happens when I just can't see it or feel it?

Here is where the second part of the definition comes into play: the conviction of things not seen. The Greek word for conviction, *elenchos*, implies an objective side of faith. It can also mean "proof," and reminds us

that our faith is not something that is simply pulled out of thin air, but that has grounding in substance. It doesn't make the definition any easier, though, because this conviction, this proof, is still in what is unseen. This may ruffle our feathers a bit. We'd rather look for what can point to and say, yes, *that's* what faith is all about. We try to play "I Spy" with our faith.

Perhaps that's what the Hebrews writer does as well. Following this definition, Hebrews delivers a list of examples of those who have been faithful, from Abel to the prophets. In these examples, we as readers begin to get a glimpse about what this thing called faith is all about. It's as if the author of Hebrews wants to remind us that in the midst of searching and wondering, we can begin to ground ourselves in the stories of our faith, the stories we hear in Scripture. In hearing these familiar stories, we are encouraged with the thought that we aren't the first ones to live in this space between known and unknown.

Consider the example of Abraham. Abraham spent over 100 years living in faith, wandering far from his home along with his wife, Sarah, trying to figure out just what God had in store for them. God gave them a

pretty good picture, but there were still a LOT of unknowns. We might imagine Abraham had a long list of questions for God. And Sarah's list was likely even longer. Throughout these questions, though, Abraham and Sarah continued to journey, and throughout these questions, God continued to remind them of the promise. Our reading for today isn't the only time God and Abraham had some conversations about what to hope for – God and Abraham spend a lot of time talking in Genesis. Even with this conversation, Abraham and Sarah are a bit unsure. We read later in Genesis of how Sarah laughed at God's promise to have a child in her old age. Even though God was assuring this couple of many things, and certainly they were hoping for many things, a lot of it seemed quite ridiculous. They were things which were not seen, and were perhaps even beyond what was reasonable to expect.

And yet, Abraham and Sarah clung to their faith. They were able to encounter what was unseen because of the reminders of God's presence in their lives, of God's continued promise to them throughout the journey. The power of the example of Sarah and Abraham is not that they lived

lives of faith without questions, lives free from wondering about what was not seen, but that their lives joined these two dimensions that our Hebrews text identifies. In the midst of change and uncertainty, they found God constant and faithful. Therefore, they too could be full of faith, holding fast to God's promises and moving forward into that future with God

There is a lot to be learned about faith from Scriptures, and the author of Hebrews seems to call us back there. It seems that through these stories, we begin to encounter something transformational – the reminder of the root of all of our faith, God. The stories of faith we find in Scripture are not simply individuals in the distant past who lived blindly, without question. They are stories of individuals who also wrestled with what it meant to have faith in God, especially when times were difficult, and there was much hidden from view. However, they continued to engage in meaningful relationship with each other, and with God, and through these relationships they were assured of their hopes, and became more confident of God's presence with them in the unknown.

The following chapters of Hebrews really are worth a read. Although I'm going to spoil it a bit for you, check it out for yourself later. After listing many examples of faithful people from the Old Testament, the author primes us for those many witnesses that have existed between then and now, who continue to call us to faith. And the author gets to the supreme model of faith – the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” in fact – the one we know as Jesus Christ. Christ, who lived among us, showed us what lives of faith looked like, even if for a short time. Through Christ, we got a glimpse of the tangible, visible presence of God with us. Christ was the assurance of things hoped for – the vessel of God's grace, offering forgiveness and salvation for the world. And, Christ continues to be where we put our hope. It is through our faith in him that we are confident in our salvation. We can't see it, we can't touch it, but we do proclaim that the proof, the conviction, of God's amazing love is that Christ died and rose for us, has prepared a place for us, and continues to be with us. And we respond to this good news with faith.

In addition to this and the one from our text in Hebrews today, I would offer a third definition of faith for consideration. Faith is seeking to remember and be aware of God's presence, in both our own experiences and in our hopes.

Such a faith calls for attentiveness, and calls us to remind one another of that faith continually. We do this each time we gather to worship. As we call ourselves to worship, we remind each other of God's promise to us and assure ourselves that God is indeed in our midst. In our confession we proclaim our faith in a God of compassion, who through grace has already forgiven our sins. We gather around the Baptismal font, as we did last Sunday, and proclaim that God has called and claimed us as God's own. We hear how God has been present in the lives of humanity throughout time as we read Scripture. We respond in singing, praising God for all that God has done. We pray together, confident of a God who listens to us. We come to this table, humble, to meet the risen Christ, remembering his death and resurrection, and celebrating the feast that is to come. All of these moments are our attempts to make our faith tangible. We have played "I

Spy” and have named for ourselves a few moments in which we have experienced God. It is in these moments where we seek renewal, so that we may be carried into the rest of our lives with the conviction of what is sometimes hard to see. And, in those times when we ourselves are struggling to see and believe, we allow the congregation to carry us, reminding us of the foundation of our faith.

In faith, we gather together. And in faith, we depart together, knowing that our work is only beginning. Beyond this time, this foundation, where are you carrying faith? Like Abraham and Sarah, and countless others, we don't always know where the journey is taking us. We leave from this place with the hope that what we have assured ourselves is true, and that our hope is in God. And at the same time, we leave this place knowing that our faith is not limited to what we can experience or touch. Some things, simply, are beyond our tactile and observational senses. Grounded in our understanding and belief in God, we find the courage to face the unseen. We can't always see the full picture, but we trust that God is in all, and will nurture our faith along the way. Perhaps, then, we can

“spy” faith as a part of that childhood game. And, when faith is the answer, our clue can be “I spy . . . something that is both hoped for and unseen.”