

August 7, 2022
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Hebrews 11:1-16 (Genesis 15:1-6; Luke 12:22-34)

FEAR AND FAITH

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the book written to the Hebrews, the 11th chapter, which you heard read earlier.

When you first saw the hymn number for our sermon hymn today, maybe the hair stood up on the back of your neck in fear. In St John's book of the Revelation, the number 666 is called the "number of the beast," referring to the devil or the anti-Christ. (cf: Revelation 13:16–18) American Christianity and End Times prognosticators have used the number 666 to stir up fear of the devil, the anti-Christ, and the End Times. But as Lutheran Christians, we know that there is nothing to fear. And that is exactly why our sermon hymn was given the number 666.

One of my seminary professors, Dr. Paul Grime, was on the hymnal committee for our Lutheran Service Book. He told us in class one day that because so many Christians feared the number 666, the hymnal committee felt it was good, right, and salutary that page 666 of the Service Book should bear the hymn: "*O Little Flock, Fear Not the Foe.*" The Christian flock need not fear the devil or hell's satanic crew. Let his evil hordes rage all they wish because God's own Word is true. You have God's Word and His promise that He is with you and you are with Him. His victory cannot fail.

Fear and *faith* are key words in our lessons this morning. Generally speaking, there are two kinds of *fear* and two kinds of *faith*. The first kind of *fear* is an emotional dread and terror of some threat or misfortune that causes great anxiety. The second kind of *fear* is having great reverence, awe, and respect toward someone, especially towards God. (ANLEX, 401)

The first kind of *faith* is the simple act of believing. It is how much trust and confidence you have in something or someone. It is subjective. It is the *faith* you have that the roof over your head will not collapse. It is the *faith* that you have that the person driving their car toward you will stay in their lane and not crash into you.

The second kind of *faith* is lifesaving faith that trusts not only in God's existence, but also trusts in God's mercy for the sake of Christ Jesus's work of salvation in His perfect life, death, and resurrection. Christ is both the founder and perfecter of *faith*. (cf: Hebrews 12:2) He is the object of your faith. God planted *faith* within you either in Baptism or when the Holy Spirit called you to faith through the preached Word of the Gospel.

Faith is passive. Faith does not add anything to the work of Christ. It only receives Christ. This faith relies on God's promises – and then receives what He has promised: forgiveness, the inheritance of righteousness, and the gift of eternal life and salvation. And because of your God given faith, He says to you:

"³² Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32)

He says to you: "***Fear not...***" For you need not fear the devil or hell's satanic crew. You have God's Word and promise that He is with you and you are with Him. His victory cannot fail.

Obviously, during the good times it is easy to joyfully proclaim that you are walking by faith, not by sight. (cf: 2 Corinthians 5:7) It is easy to be courageous when you are not experiencing terror, sickness, or anxiety. But when disaster strikes, and you cannot see with your own eyes all that God has promised you – you think you have good reason to be anxious and to fear.

There is fear and anxiety at every stage of life. In childhood, maybe it is fear of the dark. As adults, you may fear for your children, or are anxious about your job or retirement. And because the wages of sin is death, you know that unless Jesus returns really soon, sooner or later, death will be coming to put you in the grave. The threat of death causes you the fear of the unknown, will it be a quick death or will you suffer, how will your family cope in your absence, is your faith strong enough to prevail?

Dear Christian, know that God has granted you ***faith*** that enables you to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things so that you are not anxious about your life but instead, seek the Kingdom of God. (cf: Luke 12:22, 31) In our epistle text, the writer to the Hebrews describes Christian faith this way: He writes:

"¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." (Hebrews 11:1-3)

Chapter 11 of Hebrews is known as the "***Heroes of Faith***" chapter. It is 40 verses long; however, our lectionary only gives us the first 16 verses. The entire chapter lists seventeen examples of faith from ten different Old Testament believers in God in various testing of their faith. If you go back through the Old Testament and read each individual's situation, from your perspective and mine, there was plenty to be anxious about and reason to fear, but instead, they feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things. In our text, the writer defines what lifesaving faith is. It is trusting in a reality which is neither seen nor perceived – and – trusting that there is indeed a God who exists, the One who created all things visible and invisible out of nothing. This is the faith by which the people of old received their commendation from God.

In verse six, the writer goes on to say:

"... without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6)

Let me repeat what I said earlier. Faith does not add anything to the work of Christ. It only receives Christ. He is the object of Christian faith and the Christian is saved by faith alone – but what the writer is saying here is – faith is never alone. Faith is always active. True lifesaving faith is always followed by good works and love toward the neighbor out of the One who first loved you. (cf: FC Ep III, 11) God does not reward the believer as a payment for services rendered to but on account of the believer's faith in Him so that those rewards be used to love and serve the neighbor.

And that is what we see throughout chapter 11 in Hebrews. Following each of those seventeen examples of faith the writer describes lifesaving faith in action... faith which is always followed by good works in serving the neighbor. As our pericope ends in verse 16, the writer foreshadows the conclusion of the chapter speaking of a heavenly existence, a city that God has prepared for all who die in true faith, something promised, something better. (cf: Hebrews 11:16, 39-40)

We must not forget that while we call these people of old “heroes of faith,” they were every bit as human and sinful as you and me. You could even say that at certain points of their lives they were scoundrels not worthy of being role models.

- Twice, Abraham passed off his beautiful wife as his sister so the Egyptians wouldn’t kill him. It saved his skin but she was sent to Pharaoh’s house to be his wife. (cf: Genesis 12:10–20, 20:1–18)
- Jacob showed his son Joseph so much favoritism that the brothers plotted to kill him and ultimately sold Joseph into slavery. (cf: Genesis 37:3–28)
- And not in our text, but in verse 31, the writer mentions Rahab the prostitute. We do not have to speculate about her previous sinful lifestyle, but she came to life-saving faith and hid the two Israelite spies on her roof, saving their lives. (cf: Joshua 2:1–6)

The list goes on and on. These people of old, like you and me, often had their eyes on things other than the object of their faith. There are times that you think God cannot use you or that you are too sinful for God to save. But we have the testimony of God’s Word that the Holy Spirit can and does create in sinful hearts. He has the ability to transform anyone into a faithful believer, even you and me.

There is a difference between the Old Testament people of faith and you and me 21st century Christians. The difference is – they looked to the future and we look to the past. The object of faith of the people in our text was God’s Word and promise. By faith they believed God’s promise of a coming Messiah and were commended through their faith – but in their lifetime, they never received what was promised. (cf: Hebrews 11:39) You and I and all those with lifesaving faith on this side of Jesus death and resurrection live with the promise fulfilled. The object of faith is the same. Each beholding the Savior with eyes of faith. And together we will see Him on the Last Day face to face.

Faith isn’t something that you and I do. Faith is passive and faith receives. Your faith does not keep the roof from falling down on your head. Your faith does not keep the oncoming traffic on the other side of the road. Faith simply receives all the gracious promises and blessings of God and in response, uses those blessings to love and serve the neighbor.

Saving faith is the passive recipient of God’s service to you through His Son Jesus Christ:

“... the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2)

So little flock, fear not the foe – but fear, love, and trust in the One who creates and sustains lifesaving faith within you, and in Christ Jesus, the object of your faith.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.