

Meditation - "Hope in the Unseen"

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 15:1-6, Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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In our first scripture reading, Genesis 15:1-6, Abram is assured of that for which he hopes. The promise of descendants that outnumber the stars is promised in this vision. These words were spoken before the birth of Ishmael and Isaac. Reading these words from the perspective of the 21st century, we recognize that both the descendants of Ishmael, whom Abram fathered with Sarah's handmaiden Hagar, and the descendants of Isaac are heirs of the blessings of God. Our Muslim brothers and sisters trace their roots to Abraham through Ishmael. Hear now the Word of God as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures.

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2 But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." 4 But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." 5 The Lord brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then the Lord said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Our second scripture reading is from the well-known and beloved reflection on faith in Hebrews 11. In this chapter the author of Hebrews encourages the followers of Christ in the life of faith by sharing stories of the faithful from the Hebrew Scriptures. Faith is essential for all the children of God, whether Jewish, Muslim or Christian. Hear now what the Spirit is saying through the words of Scripture.

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 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.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith Abraham received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered God faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." 13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them.

The title of the sermon: “Hope in the Unseen”

The text: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, give us the conviction of things we cannot see and the assurance of the places you call us to that we do not yet know. Amen.

The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen ... This is faith, according to the author of Hebrews. Faith involves trust and tenacity, but it is not simply the case of “believing it makes it so.” Faith is forward looking, oriented toward the future, trusting that God will keep promises. In other words, faith and hope are one, and life is a pilgrimage. Abraham and Sarah didn’t know where they were going, yet they set out on a journey.

Sometimes we forget about the element of risk involved in having faith—by doing this, sadly, we take the life out of our faith. When our religion becomes something we take for granted, when it becomes too predictable, or when it becomes something of which we are so sure; then we have lost our understanding of what it means to have faith.

The very nature of faith consists of an element of uncertainty with a willingness to participate whole-heartedly on a journey to places that are unfamiliar.

Ron Suskind, a former staff writer for the Wall Street Journal wrote a book entitled *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League*. The book tells the story of Cedric Jennings, a top student at a blighted high school in Washington, D.C. and his journey from the inner city to Brown University.

The book reveals the struggles Cedric endures along the way, and how he relies on his faith, intelligence and determination to keep alive his “hope in the unseen,” a place of acceptance and recognition for who he is.

It was Cedric’s high school science teacher, Mr. Taylor, who coined the phrase “A Hope in the Unseen” when he misquotes Hebrews 11:1 after class one day. *“The substance of faith,” he says to Cedric, “is a hope in the unseen.”*

“NO, Wrong—you messed it!” Cedric laughs.

Mr. Taylor may have gotten the words wrong, but he didn’t get the essence of it wrong. Cedric takes this “pocket-sized version of the original” with him to Brown University. While at Brown Cedric encounters a multitude of intellectual, social and spiritual challenges. Besides being far behind most of the other freshmen academically, he discovers he has little to nothing in common with the white students, many of whom came from privileged backgrounds, or the middle class blacks who were not familiar with the struggles and poverty of the inner city. As Cedric’s journey unfolds it becomes clear to him what makes his “hope in the unseen” possible:

the faith of his mother who endured long, hard hours of work at minimum wage to meet the unreasonable rent of the slum lord and who devoted her life to the church, providing Cedric with a place of worship and a caring community on his journey;

the faith of his pastor who had the vision and foresight not only to preach the gospel to Cedric's impoverished neighborhood but also to give Cedric permission to move on to a new place in his belief;

the faith of his rich benefactor who risked the investment in Cedric's education and life (something many people say they would like to do but never get around to it);

the faith of his tutor who believed in Cedric's ability and who skillfully brought out the best in him;

the faith of his white college classmate who had the courage to move beyond the familiar and risked the challenges of cultural differences in a friendship with Cedric;

and, yes, the faith of Cedric who endured loneliness and long hours of studying, who took action by setting goals and standards far beyond other's expectations, and who risked a hope unseen.

When Mr. Taylor surprises Cedric with a visit at the end of his freshman year, Cedric asks him if he remembers that time in his classroom when he talked about the substance of faith as "a hope in the unseen." Cedric shares with Mr. Taylor that he always imagined the unseen as a place, a place he couldn't yet see, up ahead, where he'd be welcomed and accepted, just for who he is. Now he realizes that there is work he has to do to really know who he is and to accept himself. Cedric understands that he has to accept himself before he can expect other people to accept him and that he is just now beginning to see himself more clearly.

Mr. Taylor looks at him tenderly, wanting, it seems, to second Cedric's insight. He says, "The unseen may be a place in your heart."

Perhaps this is what the author of Hebrews wants us to know about faith. Faith is not simply belief that there is a God, faith is trust in the God we believe. Faith is not simply to believe in doctrine or to follow rigid rules, faith is hope in the God who cannot be contained in human words and who understands the limitations of the law. Faith is not black and white, faith is ever-changing and growing on life's sojourn.

Because Sarah and Abraham trusted that their future belonged to God, they could risk in the adventure of faith. Together they left what was familiar and comfortable and ventured into "a hope in the unseen" looking for the promised homeland where they would be welcomed and accepted. During their sojourn they came to realize that the welcome and acceptance they were looking for along the way was a place in their hearts; hearts which are big enough to believe in the impossible, to hope in the unborn, and to travel a difficult journey of possibilities with God.

Since his graduation from Brown in 1999, Cedric Jennings earned a master's degree in education in human development and psychology from Harvard University and a second master's degree in clinical social work from the University of Michigan.

Today Cedric is the Director of the DC Council's Office of Youth Programs, where he develops and manages quality programming that educates and empowers youth to become agents of change in their communities through civic engagement. Cedric also works with youth at his childhood church—hoping to give back, to create for others some of those unseen things he

never had, and to journey with people to the places in their hearts that need healing, understanding and acceptance.

How fortunate we are at Westminster to host Compass for Kids, a mentoring program for children at risk who attend Graham, our neighborhood elementary school. How grateful we are for those who serve in this way, and we welcome others to become a part of this hope in the unseen.

As we travel on our individual journeys, may we celebrate a life of possibilities believing and trusting in the God of impossibilities. May we delight in the God who sojourned with us in Christ Jesus and who understands the risk of faith. May we have the courage to embrace the unfamiliar and to discover “hope in the unseen” places within our hearts.

By the grace of God, may it be so. Amen.