

Meditation - "Hope in the Unseen"

Scripture: Isaiah 1:1, 10-17, Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-10, 13-16

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In our first reading from Isaiah (1:1, 10-17) we recognize a common theme among the ancient prophets of Israel. Isaiah echoes the message that worship is an idle exercise unless it brings about a changed heart in the worshiper. Such worship is a waste of time for those who participate, and more importantly, it is a waste of God's time. However, worship as it was meant to be changes hearts and inspires men and women to acts of faith, characterized by the justice and compassion of the One they worship. Hear now God's Holy word.

*The vision of Isaiah, son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

*<sup>10</sup> Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! <sup>11</sup> What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. <sup>12</sup> When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; <sup>13</sup> bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation — I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. <sup>14</sup> Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. <sup>15</sup> When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. <sup>16</sup> Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, <sup>17</sup> learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is from the well-known and beloved reflection on faith in Hebrews 11. In this chapter the author of Hebrews, probably a student of the Apostle Paul, encourages the followers of Christ in the life of faith by sharing stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. Hear now what the Spirit is saying.

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

*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. By faith Abraham 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 Abraham of the same promise. For Abraham looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because Abraham considered God faithful who had promised. 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.' 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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 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. Amen.*

The title of the meditation: “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.

Scholars say the title "To the Hebrews" is not a part of the original manuscript: the author of this early Christian letter does not waste time on salutations but seeks to inspire, motivate, encourage, and theologically counsel a community experiencing persecution and quite possibly the abandonment of faith. The author of Hebrews wants to provide a word of clarity, a word of strength, a word of consolation, and a word of hope.

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 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.*

In other words, according to the Rev. Liz Myer Boulton, a Disciples of Christ pastor, though the news around us may be full of shadows, though the evidence does not look good, we can and must believe—for our faith is not “evidential” in the conventional way. It’s based on more than one kind of news: the signs of the times around us, yes, but also and preeminently on the Good News of the Christian gospel. We have a God who brings good out of evil and life out of death. This is who God is and this is what our hope is based upon. In a complicated and unjust world, we have a God who is totally for us. No matter how barren we feel (like Sarah), new birth is possible. No matter how bleak the world may look, new life is possible. For us, new life is possible through faith, through trust, through believing the promises of God despite what we see.

Faith involves trust and tenacity. Faith and hope are one, and life is a pilgrimage. Abraham and Sarah did not know where they were going, yet they faithfully set out on a journey. Sometimes we forget about the element of risk involved in having faith. When our religion becomes something we take for granted, when it becomes too predictable or something about which we are so sure; when it becomes self-centered and no longer inspires us to pursue fresh acts of justice and compassion as the prophet Isaiah reminds us, 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 the journey into places that are unfamiliar to which we have been called.

The title of this meditation, *Hope in the Unseen*, is a misquote of Hebrews 11:1 found in Ron Suskind’s book about the journey of Cedric Johnson, an honor student from an inner-city high school in Washington, D.C. to Brown University. I received the book from a dear friend and brilliant educator in St. Louis, Judy Rubenstein, and passed it on to a Brown University graduate, cardiologist, and mother of one of Paul’s best friends, Alosha, who was willing to risk an uncertain journey to Russia with her husband and brought home two beautiful children whom they faithfully raised as their own.

The book affirms the faith of the “great cloud of witnesses” that made Cedric’s unexpected sojourn possible (his devoted mother, his resilient youth pastor, his generous benefactor, and his dedicated tutor) and what Cedric learned about himself and his faith as he traveled to a place of challenge and transformation. As Cedric reaches beyond himself and is stretched emotionally, socially, and intellectually in the expectations before him, he discovers that the substance of his faith, “a hope in the unseen,” is not so much a place he could not yet see, up ahead, where he would be welcomed and accepted for who he is. Cedric comes to realize that the “hope in the unseen” is within himself, a place in his heart, and grows out of the important work of honest reflection, prayer, insight, and self-realization.

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 trusting the God in whom we believe, the God who is more concerned with our acts of justice and compassion than burnt offerings. Because Sarah and Abraham trusted that their future belonged to God, they could risk in faith. Together they 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 place they could not yet see, up ahead, the welcome and acceptance they were looking for was within, a place in their hearts--hearts which are large enough to live lives of compassion and justice, to hope in the unborn, and to travel the unseen journey before them.

As we travel on our individual journeys, may we delight in the God who understands the risk of faith, the God who sojourned with us in Christ Jesus, and the God who calls us to acts of justice and compassion. 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.