

Pastor's Message – 8/7/22
Hebrews 11: 1-16

“Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.” (Heb. 11:1) Faith is a way of seeing. Faith is the path we walk every day and throughout our life: the ground on which we walk.

Have you heard about the glass-bottomed walkways in China? The Skywalk Bridge in the Grand Canyon National Park? Walk out on one of these and your heart rate is likely to go up and your knees to start shaking. Like living by faith.

A few years ago, a floor panel in a newly opened glass walkway cracked. The skywalk was suspended some 325 feet above a canyon floor in central China. Think about the height of 10 feet. Think about the height of a high diving board. It's high. Now think *three ... hundred ... and twenty-five feet* above the canyon floor, and you're standing on a plate of glass suspended in midair, as it were, and the glass suddenly CRACKS! To say that this freaked everyone out is an understatement. *Terror among the tourists!!!* That's the screaming headline on media sites.

Hearing that news is enough to send a chill up the spine of even the most intrepid among us; seeing pictures of the bridge makes it even worse. They show a narrow, 1,300-foot-long glass-bottomed walkway, part of which is wrapped high in the air across a cliff face and part of which is suspended between two canyon walls in Yuntai Mountain Scenic Park in Henan province, China.

According to witnesses, when the crack happened, there was a sudden loud bang and a tremor beneath the feet of bridge crossers who weren't even near the shattered section. People started screaming and running to the ends of the bridge.

The good news is that the cracked panel did not give way and no one was hurt, but the bridge was immediately closed for repairs. Park officials say there never was any danger, as the crack, probably caused by an object a visitor dropped, was only in the top layer of the panel -- and the panes are reportedly designed to carry 1,700 pounds -- but people on the walkway when the shattering occurred weren't comforted.

Even before the crack, people were uneasy crossing the bridge -- a bridge of nothing. A bridge of air. The glass creates an illusion that you're walking in space with nothing to support you. Yet, you don't fall. Gravity is thwarted by a pane of glass beneath your feet.

The whole idea is to let visitors see the depths below them, and for those who try it, it takes a lot of courage to venture out. Some people got *on their hands and knees and crawled across*. Others *grabbed the side*

cables and shuffled their grasp of the cables as they inched across. Some others *walked confidently* -- but fast, preferring to get across as soon as possible. Sort of describes how many of us move along in our faith walk, doesn't it?

Here in the United States, we have our own glass-bottomed attraction, the famous Skywalk Bridge in the Grand Canyon National Park. Visitors can walk out on a glass-bottomed platform that juts out into thin air more than 700 feet above the canyon floor. It's beautiful and terrifying at the same time. In your mind, you *know* the glass will support you, and that the structure is completely safe. But your gut doesn't quite embrace what the mind believes. Tourists report that their heart rates go up. Some sweat a bit. And many try not to look down at their feet, which seem to be suspended in midair.

Still, most people have faith. They walk out on the glass and enjoy the remarkable vistas created by God.

Glass-bottomed bridges are a good metaphor for faith. Faith is "the evidence of things we cannot see" our Bible reading says, and walking on glass means we're not seeing that which supports us. What we *are* seeing are the dangers below, and they can be terrifying. We grasp the "cables" that give us comfort (God's word) or perhaps we crawl on our knees (prayer).

Our faith in Christ is like that, isn't it? Especially these days when what we can see beneath our faith can make us wonder just how substantial such trust is. For example, we look down and see *many other people* who seem quite content to carry on with life without commitment to any being higher than themselves, and they appear to be getting along all right. Perhaps it crosses our minds that by trying to live righteously, we're missing out on something.

Sometimes those things we thought were valuable prove not to be quite so valuable after all. Have you ever walked through the tables at a garage sale or a rummage sale and seen one of those hamburger makers? You know the kind. You plug it in, put in a ball of hamburger, squeeze it down, and in three minutes you have a fried hamburger. When it was new, it had a price tag of \$15. But now, at the rummage sale, it's a dollar and still there in the middle of the afternoon. You might wonder why it's still there. Maybe it doesn't work. But "of course it works, the owner would say, "if it didn't work we would just throw it away!"

There are numerous other "treasures" with bargain prices at rummage sales and it strikes me that what is considered a treasure today is often not very prized in the near future. The hamburger cooker fried hamburgers just like its makers promised it would. The hamburgers it made were just as good as those fried in a skillet. So what makes our treasures lose their value so quickly? Why do we find disappointment in our treasures so often? Is it

because they do not change our lives as much as we had hoped they would? While the products at that or any rummage sale fulfilled the promise to do what they were designed to do, they must have disappointed their owners because they did not make their lives any better.

In our Bible reading from the Letter to the Hebrews today, we prayed a wonderful litany of “owners” of a promise: owners of a promise from God. The star of that litany is Mr. Faith himself: Abraham. By faith, Abraham took his family, left his home in Ur, and attempted to settle down in the middle of nowhere as a stranger. By faith, he became a father in his 100th year. By faith, Abraham was willing to offer his miracle-son Isaac as a human sacrifice. It is the activity of his faith that marks Abraham as a person of faith.

Abraham and his wife Sarah took huge risks. Although they were “very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold,” Genesis 13.2 tells us, they did not find security in possessions or land. They set off in faith. And it wasn’t as if they never doubted. Again, according to the Book of Genesis, they did have doubts – serious doubts, especially concerning the promise of descendants – but they trusted God to fulfill His promise, even though they would not live to see the full fruition of God’s providing.

They weren’t the only ones we read about: Abel offers a sacrifice; Noah builds a boat; Moses’ inclusion on a faith list is a no-brainer based upon his leadership in Egypt on behalf of the Hebrews, and for his role in providing a vision for the faithless Israelites and successfully bringing them within sight of the Promised Land.

One woman (others are referenced in 11:35) makes the list - Rahab - who, by faith, aided and abetted Israelite spies.

Of course, there are others - names we might recognize and some we might not: Enoch, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson, Gideon, Barak, David and Samuel.

All of these people are powerful **action figures**, and that alone gets them a mention on a biblical faith list, here in one of the Bible’s most famous chapters, Hebrews 11.

These **action figures** are not on the list because they were models of perfection. They were not always perfectly obedient to God. They screwed up at times like the humans they were. They obeyed God much of the time, but when they disobeyed, it was ugly. Noah got drunk after the flood and passed out naked in a tent, only to have his son, Ham, walk in on him in his rather ignoble condition. Abraham lied about his wife, saving his own skin but putting Sarah at risk - twice. Jacob cheated Esau. Moses killed an Egyptian. Rahab supported herself through prostitution. Jephthah was the son of another prostitute and then was run out of town by his father’s real wife. Barak refused to fight without Deborah holding his hand. Samson had a

weakness for beautiful, persistent women. David's misconduct in the bedroom and the battlefield are well-documented.

They may not be in the litany because they were so special. In fact, many of them were profoundly ordinary and so, good role models for us who may not be special but ordinary people.

In our Bible reading today, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews describes the faith of Abraham and many others as a continued commitment to seeking after something they could not see. Faith is never presented here as a heroic, once-for-all decision. It's an ongoing commitment they held and acted out day by day, year by year, as part of the very fabric of their lives.

That means faith is something that happens in the world, in the real world of our actual lives. It also means that faith is not something that happens the way "the world" typically depicts it—as some rash, "heroic" decision that changes everything from that time forward. Faithful living pursues the promises of God consistently over a lifetime.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we are faithful when we keep moving in the direction of a promise—something we can't see or even necessarily fully realize, but that keeps moving us forward and calling us on. Faith is the courage to endure, to stay the course, to keep the covenant, even through times of trial. Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.

We read about the faith heroes of the past. What makes a person of faith influential today? What common thread runs through the lives of all those people on the Hebrews list? What do a good-hearted prostitute, a good man with a drinking problem who built a boat and a blinded, strong man have in common?

They were people who were willing to act on a vision even though the fruit of their faith was not readily apparent. The text tells us that they all died before receiving everything God had promised them. From a distance, they saw what had been promised. But they never fully enjoyed those promises in this life.

Those who live by faith may never understand why a sheep offering trumps a fruit offering in God's eyes, as it did in the lives of Abel and Cain. Those who live by faith may never understand that curious tugging which makes us long to leave home and move into unfamiliar territory, as in the lives of Abraham and Sarah. Those who live by faith may never understand why, even though they are faithful, they suffer indignities and persecution.

Those who live by faith accept that life is mysterious and full of danger and temptation. And yet those who live by faith carry on, still believing in the promises of God in spite of all appearances.

Faith does not guarantee power or beauty or riches or even influence. Faith merely - and miraculously - “shows the reality of what we hope for; the evidence of things we cannot see.” This is what that odd assortment of people in Hebrews 11 had in common: they actionized their faith, influential because of God's influence on them.

I read a story a while ago about an Episcopal priest who went shopping for a Harley Davidson motorcycle. The salesman talked about speed, acceleration, risk, and the women who like men that ride them. Then the salesman found out that the guy was a priest. Immediately his language and tone of voice changed. Now the selling points were good gas mileage, practicality, and visibility.

Have believers in Jesus, good church folk, told the world that being a Christian is more like riding a lawnmower than a motorcycle? Is the life of faith more safe and sound or dangerous and exciting? ... The common image if the church is pure lawn mower – slow, deliberate, plodding. Our task is to take the church out on the open road, give it the gas, and see what the old baby will do!”

The Letter to the Hebrews was written either in the 60s or the 80s, by an unnamed Christian leader, to a community made up of both Gentile and Jewish converts. At this time, Christians were largely considered to be a subversive group. I don't know that the Church is considered a radical or subversive group today. But maybe our call is to keep the faith and keep walking the walk and talking the talk. I think we are called to both action and substance.

There's an older song now popularized by the Christian group 4Him which talks about carrying the torch of faith and passing it on “For Future Generations.”

The signs are obvious, they are everywhere
 All that we hear about is the gloom and despair
 Too many would be prophets sayin' "It's the end of it all"
 'Cause mother earth can't take much more
 The hammer's gonna fall

So nature has its needs, that's a lesson learned
 But it appears to me there are greater concerns
 'Cause we can save the planet
 Thinkin' we will somehow survive
 But Father time is calling us
 To save somebody's life, so

I won't bend and I won't break
 I won't water down my faith
 I won't compromise in a world of desperation
 What has been I cannot change
 But for tomorrow and today
 I must be a light for future generations

If we could find a way to preserve our faith
 So those who follow us
 See the price that was paid
 Then maybe when they question
 What it's gonna take to survive
 They'll find the strength to carry on
 In what we leave behind

I won't bend and I won't break
 I won't water down my faith
 I won't compromise in a world of desperation
 What has been I cannot change
 But for tomorrow and today
 I must be a light for future generations

Lookin' in the eyes of the children
 Knowing that tomorrow is at stake
 When the choice is up to them
 Will they have the strength to say

We won't bend and we won't break
 we won't water down our faith
 We won't compromise in a world of desperation
 What has been we cannot change
 But for tomorrow and today
 We must be a light for future generations

“Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.” That’s walking on glass, fully conscious of the dangers below, but believing that God will not let us down. And over the centuries, millions of people have discovered that faith is enough, that it is the tangible surface of the path of life. That’s our call – to live what we believe – not always seeing the results, but believing that the fruit will grow. “No terror among” believers; we walk confidently, having experienced and received the promises of God. How? **By faith!**