

**SERMON – 1/12/24****'The Legends'**

Hebrews 11:8-16

"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1)

Today is Advent Sunday, the first Sunday of a new year in the church's calendar and although there will doubtless be plenty time at the *end* of this month for turn-of-the-year reflections – reminiscing about the past, making resolutions about the future – I'd like us to pause this morning in the light of words we used together as we lit the first of our Advent candles: 'Shaped by our past, we come with hope' to renew our faith as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the Lord's Supper and then to step back out into our busy lives.

There is a past, present and future aspect to faith just as there is a past, present and future aspect to life in general, but just as some people *live* in the past (the good old days and all that), just as some people are perpetually overwhelmed by the pressures of the moment, and just as some folk just can't wait for the next big thing to come along, so many of us can lose sight of the ongoing dynamic of faith because, for us, it may all be about past experience, or all about the present moment, or all about what may or may not lie ahead in the purposes of God.

If we are to understand what faith in Christ truly is, then we need to grasp the fact that it is about the totality of the journey we are called to make with God. While we are shaped by our past it is hope that shapes our present and guides us into the future. While we begin at that point when we accept and believe (with rejoicing) that the coming of the Messiah into the world – His birth, His life, His death and resurrection – was for us, we have to carry that on into the everyday things of life, and living day by day in a faithful dependence on God, to allow it to lead us wherever God may be taking us in the future. Having faith cannot be a momentary event – it must be a growing, developing thing that is concerned with the past, the present *and* the future.

Earlier, we were thinking about Bible stories that are special to us, perhaps from our childhood or perhaps from more recent past and our Bible reading for today came from a chapter in which we are reminded of a whole succession of heroes of the faith, legends if you like. Their stories, some recounted very briefly, others in more detail, all come under the famous banner text from the opening verse of the chapter: "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

The writer begins with the most general example of faith in God, which will actually ring bells not only not only with committed Christians but with a great many other people too – 'By faith, he writes, we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.' In other words, he is saying that those who believe that the world was created out of nothing, rather than by normal methods of construction (where you use one set of already existing ingredients to make something new) – those who believe in creation out of nothing – are displaying faith – being certain of something that they cannot see with their eyes or explain by the normal rules of science.

That's the general example, which many, many people can relate to. What the writer then goes on to show is that the same kind of action is what was taken by those who believed the *promises* of God and allowed that belief to shape their whole life. Just as you can't see or prove scientifically that God created the universe out of absolutely nothing; so you can't see with your eyes (or even sometimes understand with your mind) what it is that God is holding out to you in His Word. Nonetheless you accept it, you believe it, you become certain of it simply because it is God who has spoken. There may be no logical *reason* to accept what He is saying – quite the contrary, it may fly completely in the face of logic or reason but faith is being certain of what we do *not* see, and being certain for no other reason than that God has promised that it will be so and that we trust Him.

The writer to the Hebrews takes us through a whole list of people of faith (some of whose stories we spoke about at the beginning of the service as having had an important place in the journey of faith of people here today) – Abel, Enoch, Noah; Abraham, Isaac

Jacob; Joseph, Moses, Joshua; Gideon, Barak, Jephthah; David, Samuel and the prophets; a large crowd of witnesses who call us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends.

The verses that we read earlier highlighted two stories from the life of Abraham and it is to them in particular that I want to turn our thoughts this morning.

The first concerns the call that Abraham received from God to move from where he was in Haran: The Lord had said to Abraham, we're told in Genesis: 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.' He is not told where he is going. All he knows is that he *will* be shown in due course. By all human standards, that is a very unsatisfactory basis on which to move house, yet Abraham obeys the call – shaped by his past experience of God's faithfulness he takes God at His Word and by faith he uproots himself with all his flocks and makes his home in what we who have the benefit of hindsight know will ultimately be the Promised Land of Canaan.

The second episode concerns the promise that God made to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. He and his wife are well-advanced in years - they are childless and by all human standards they are beyond child-bearing years; yet, says the Book of Genesis in one of those phrases that is taken up in the New Testament, Abraham 'believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Again, by human standards, Abraham and Sarah are mad to expect God to make them parents in old age, but Abraham is simply taking his day to day walk with God one stage further and saying that if God has been faithful to us in the past, if we are conscious of the presence of God here and now, what is to stop us believing that God will continue with us in the future; what is to stop us trusting what He promises us?

And *that*, says the writer to the Hebrews, is what faith is – "Being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Not a blind faith in anything for its own sake; nor yet a sort of wishful thinking that hopes beyond hope that everything will somehow turn out alright in the end, but an acceptance that what God has done He has done for you; an active believing in God's faithfulness and in the trustworthiness of His promises; and a

trust in God that enables you to step out confidently into the unknown of the future. Faith is about living not only in terms of what we can see and touch and know by our own experience or by scientific experiment, but by what God has said and done, by the stories of legendary individuals passed on to us in the Bible and by what we know through our own walk with Him day by day that He still says and does today.

Think about what that means for you in your situation as an individual or as a family today. Think about what that means for this congregation in a time of change. Call to mind those Bible stories, those heroes of the faith who have shaped your past and allow yourself to come to God with hope this Advent. What lies ahead of us no-one can know with certainty – we can make assumptions on the basis of what is likely and what is unlikely (although that would not have stood Abraham nor many other Biblical characters in very good stead); you can make choices about your future direction according to the best human advice (although that would not have been much good for Abraham and Sarah). We cannot *know*, we cannot *see* what precisely lies before us. None of us knows exactly what the future holds, but there *is* One who *does* know, the One who holds all things in His hands, the One whom Abraham and Sarah trusted. Faith is being sure of *Him* in Christian hope and being certain that while we do not and cannot see, *He* does.

Advent is a time for looking forward. We are preparing for Christmas, which of course is a celebration of a long-past event, the birth of our Saviour Jesus. But we are also reminding ourselves of God's promise that one day He will send His Son again into the world, this time as Judge and King. In that hope this is a time for living each day, each moment consciously in the presence of God – it is a time for living by faith, a time for being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

We have all been shaped by our past but we come this Advent to be renewed in hope. We have lit the first of our Advent candles as a sign of hope that all that has been promised will come. We come to this Table to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and to take hold by faith of all the benefits that He

has won for us and of the promise that one day He will come in glory to make all things new.

Shaped by our past, we come with hope. "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."