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Now faith is the assurance [substance] of things being hoped-for,  
the conviction of things not being seen.

Hebrews 11:1

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God's grace and peace.

As I write this sermon, this will be my last sermon to Grace Lutheran Congregation as her called pastor. It has been a blessing to serve at Grace over the past seven and a half years. It is my prayer that God's continued blessing be with you, as you continue to rejoice in His wonderful grace given to us in Christ Jesus, our loving God and Saviour. It is my prayer that you continue to rejoice in the gift of faith that God has given you, and the blessings that flow from this.

As we approach the Bible Reading for today from Hebrews 11 (a very well-known passage of Scripture, with the Reading for today being Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16), this whole chapter is a wonderful reflection on the theme of 'faith'.

It is stating the obvious, but 'faith' is important to all of us, whether we be Christian or not. People have 'faith' in other people. People have 'faith' in their governments. People have 'faith' in 'the laws of nature'. People have faith in other things as well, such as pets who comfort, doctors who care, sports team to win, money, the joy of human love, the gift of art to inspire, the value of work, the hope of other people to drive correctly on the road, fun with family, and so many other things. If you think about the totality of your life, and what you also 'experience' from day-to-day, you will find that you have faith in many, many things. 'Faith' exists in so many things, even when we do not fully realise this. Your life is lived by 'faith' in people, in the things of creation, and so many other intangible things (such as being able to experience 'love', whatever that may be for different people).

Of course, we also know that we may have many crises of faith. People may 'lose faith' in governments (and extreme crises may even lead to protest and rebellion). People may 'lose faith' in doctors and those who care for them, and so not seek appropriate help when they can (or they may experience inappropriate health, and not seek other options). And people may 'lose faith' in 'significant others' such as husband or wife, and this leads to marriage break-down and divorce.

Our lives are lived by faith, and not only as we 'put our trust' in other people or things. 'Faith' is not only about 'receiving things'. 'Faith' also has to do with what we 'put our trust in' for those 'things' (including values and ideals) that give as 'meaning' and 'purpose' for every day of our life. Think about your life. We need 'faith'. We have faith in family, in carers, that the TV will turn on when we push the button, that the air we breathe will give us life, and that we can

experience things like love, and joy, and happiness, and inner peace. Just think about your life, and a single day of your life (today, even). In whom and what do you 'put your faith' in? If you spend time with this, you will come up with a large list – not matter your circumstance in life. And you could also probably make a large list for those times when your 'faith' in people has been tested, or even broken (and how this impacts on your life, and the lives of those around you).

When we come to the Bible Reading for today from Hebrews 11 (which the writer to the Hebrews says) it is about the topic of 'faith'. The writer to the Hebrews says, "Now faith is the assurance [substance] of things being hoped-for, the conviction of things not being seen."

Hebrews was written to a group of first-century Christians who were in danger of giving up. Times were hard (see Hebrews 10:32-34). The letter appeals to all these severely tested believers to keep their faith firmly anchored to the moorings of truth, to maintain their steady confidence in Christ and to press on to mature Christian stability (Hebrews 2:1; 3:6; 6:1). This letter's primary exhortation is an appeal for endurance, using various Old Testament examples (Hebrews 6:15; 11:27). Most significant of all, Jesus endured (Hebrews 12:2-3). These Jewish Christians could endure by looking to Christ.

Hebrews challenges Jesus' followers to remain faithful to Him as the one who is the ultimate revelation of God's love and mercy. Throughout the letter to the Hebrews, the audience is challenged to remain faithful to Jesus, who is greater than the heroes of the faith. We should look to the giants of the faith found in the Hebrew Bible as examples for how to live despite hardships and persecution. These challenges may make us uncomfortable, but instead of fearing them, we can remember everything that Jesus has done.

The letter to Hebrews compares and contrasts Jesus to key historical people and events from the Hebrew Bible (what we now call 'The Old Testament'). Through these comparisons, we see Jesus superiority. He is greater than the angels, the Torah, Moses, the promised land, earthly priests, sacrifices, and the covenant. He is the hope for a new creation, our eternal priest, and the perfect sacrifice.

What is this faith? It is not just a mere intellectual belief that there is some sort of a Higher Power up there. That is not saving faith. No, faith, biblically speaking, is much more specific and substantial than that. When we're talking about faith, we're talking about faith in the one true God—the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who has revealed Himself to us in Holy Scripture, in the preaching and teaching of the gospel.

This gospel faith is focused in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who reveals the Father's heart of mercy to us—Jesus Christ, whom the Holy Spirit bears witness to and glorifies. This Jesus Christ is indeed the very Son of God, the only Saviour sent from heaven. He is your Saviour, the one who came to rescue you from sin and death, and to give you forgiveness and everlasting life in their place.

When it comes to the topic of faith, and particularly 'faith' for a Christian, it is sometimes helpful to remember that 'faith' is both a 'noun' and a 'verb'. The 'noun side' speaks to the 'content of 'the faith'. There are absolute truths, things to 'believe in'. We 'believe in' things like gravity, and the hope of experiencing love, and so many other things. They are the 'substance' of our 'faith'. The 'Christian Faith' has 'things to believe in' (and ultimately, we are talking about Jesus- who He is, and what He does for us). But 'faith' is also a 'verb' – it is an 'action'. And for us, as Christians, it is important to remember the one who is truly performing this 'action' – and it is not our own selves. It is God the Holy Spirit, working in our hearts and lives.

Today's readings, of course, are about faith. And the Reading from Hebrews refers back to the Book of Genesis, where we hear a the familiar story of Abraham and Sarah, who were old and without children – but who were promised by God that their descendants would be as difficult to count as the stars in the sky. "Look up toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. . . so shall your descendants be." Abraham believed the Lord, "and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

The author of Hebrews, then, uses Abraham as one in a series of examples of faith in a "letter" that is really a sermon exhorting an early Christian community to stand fast in the midst of difficulties and challenges to their faith. Perhaps faith is so hard to define that it is easier or better to use examples than to write a lot of theoretical things about it. It's the experience of real people in a real relationship with God that can help us to grasp the meaning of faith.

Faith is a miracle. For most of us, that miracle started in our baptism. There at the baptismal font, God put His name on us and made us His children. There in the blest baptismal waters, Christ's holy blood washed away our sins. The Holy Spirit was given to us, the Spirit who creates and nourishes saving faith in us, and keeps us in the one true faith our whole life long.

With this gift of faith, you will be able to make it through all the challenges and obstacles you face in life. In spite of all the adversities and the setbacks and let-downs and the "How come all this bad stuff is happening to me?"—in spite of all that, your faith in God's goodness will not be destroyed. Tested, yes, but not destroyed. You know that God is for you and with you, even when it doesn't look like it. The ultimate proof is in the cross of Christ. This is the one thing you can hold on to, when everything else is falling apart.

Sometimes I think about the impossibility of faith. I mean, if you stop and think about all the things that are working against faith, it's amazing that any of us have it. To believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and all that that involves, to trust in the goodness and the promises of God, in spite of all that would cause us to not believe—it's simply amazing. The miracle of faith is a miracle, because it is all God's doing, God working this faith in you through his powerful, dynamic word. This faith in Christ your Saviour will see you through every obstacle you will face in life, and on into the life to come.

In a former parish there were a group of Christians who acknowledged that sometimes we would say 'goodbye' to people, knowing that we may never see them again in this earthly life. Think of the first Lutheran who arrived in Australia by boat. When they said 'goodbye' to their families overseas, they know they most likely would never see them again on this earth. It's incredible, when you think about it. There are times when we say 'goodbye' to people, knowing in the depths of hearts it will be the last time we see them on this earth. But that group of Christians in that former parish would then say, "We will see you in the New Jerusalem." And this picks up the idea from our Reading today (Hebrews 11:14-16): *"People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."*

Trusting in God means setting out on a journey, like Abraham and Sarah – and so many other people in the Bible – a journey of faith toward a future where God's design for creation will be fulfilled – toward the "Heavenly City." Trusting in God means seeing God's goodness in the worst of times, and believing that God's blessings will outnumber the stars in the sky, even if we could count them. Trusting in God means seeing beauty and grace in what may seem like the smallest of wonders.

It is faith that gives substance to our hope. When it looks like life is just too hard to bear, when we struggle with that pain or loss or loneliness or doubt, faith enables us to reach out and feel the grasp of God on our lives, to know that we are headed on that journey to the heavenly city where all of God's purposes will be fulfilled. Faith is not agreeing to a doctrine, rather, as someone has put it, faith is a "sunburst of truth, it is the behaviour of someone who allows God to be God, trusting in someone other than oneself."

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we believe that God has conquered sin and death. We believe in our hearts that what we see is not all that there is. We believe that we will come to our journey's end and will finally understand what all those statements of faith, catechism questions, and theological definitions really meant. We believe that we will once again be with those we love, those who have loved us. We believe that we will be with God.

It is my prayer that God's continued blessing be with you, as you continue to rejoice in His wonderful grace given to us in Christ Jesus, our loving God and Saviour. It is my prayer that you continue to rejoice in the gift of faith that God has given you, and the blessings that flow from this, in Jesus' name.

And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.