

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for.”

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

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Back when I was a youngster going to the Presbyterian Sunday School, our teacher would call the roll every week. Children who had perfect attendance received a little award at the end of the year, an attendance pin, so the teacher had to keep track of who was there every Sunday morning. It was a rule that when your name was called out, you had to answer, not by saying “Here,” but by repeating a Bible verse. One of my favorite verses was Hebrews 11, verse 1: *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* It’s still one of my favorites.

When I was ten years old I really didn’t know what that verse meant, but I’ve had abundant opportunities to learn since then. When I was ten, I *hoped* that, for some reason beyond my imagining, school would be cancelled the next day so I could stay home and play all day. I *hoped* that we’d have macaroni and cheese for supper. I *hoped* that we’d get to go to Colorado for a week during summer vacation. The last hope was realized, and this East Texas flatlander got to see the Rocky Mountains for the first time in June of 1955. I’d never seen a mountain before! I thought, “Wouldn’t it be fun to *live* in Colorado?”

Frederick Buechner says that if preachers decide to preach about hope, then they should preach out of what they themselves hope for. I think that’s good advice, so I’ll tell you some of the things I hope for.

I hope that Christ Church will have an impact for good on the community around us and maybe even on the world beyond this valley. I hope that people who come to church here Sunday after Sunday will go home feeling like it was time well-spent, even if they were brought up Baptist and aren’t familiar with Episcopal hymns! I hope they’ll be glad they were here rather than at a concert rehearsal down at the Tent, or on the golf course, or hiking, or just sleeping late. I hope every week that at least one thing I say in my sermon might kindle a light in the darkness for somebody and inspire them to trust Jesus, or give them strength for the coming week, or offer insight into the meaning of life. I hope that when I pray for sick people to be healed or depressed people to be released from their burdens, at least some of them will indeed be lifted up and made well and strong and happy again.

And I hope that when the *Ministry for Tomorrow* Campaign concludes, we’ll have received pledges to cover our entire goal (*plus* the interest we’re going to have to pay on our construction loan). I hope that when our new building is finished, it will prove to be an ideal facility for ministries of hospitality, outreach, witness, education and service that we haven’t begun to imagine yet. I hope it will, indeed, honor our heritage and show us prepared for whatever the future will bring.

The Bible verse says, “FAITH *is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*” Faith and hope are inseparably connected. *Faith* is the foundation on which *hope* is built. Faith is the inner assurance that the things we hope for are – at least in some significant measure – going to be achieved.

Faith is a decision; it’s a choice. Let’s use an analogy. I think of faith as a choice we make about the kind of relationship we want to have with special people in our life —*and* with God. For example, when people get married they pledge their *faith* in one another. They wouldn’t get married if they didn’t *believe in* each other. On the day of the wedding they don’t *know* whether everything in life is going to work out perfectly for them over the next twenty-five years – or even the next two years. But they *believe in* one another and so they have hope for the future.

Faith is not mainly about believing particular doctrines. It’s not mainly about formal theology. When we say the Creed, we don’t say “We *believe that* God is the Father Almighty.” We say “We *believe in* God.” Faith isn’t about doctrines, and it isn’t a vague “spiritual” attitude towards life. It’s not some hazy kind of

“positive outlook” or “readiness to believe”. That’s all a lot of New Age waffle. For Christians, *faith is our chosen relationship with God* —our radical trust in the One who has revealed himself to the world in Jesus Christ.

“*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Faith isn’t the same thing as knowledge, but faith isn’t contrary to reason, either. We have good *reasons* for putting our trust in God, exactly the same way as a man and woman have good *reasons* for committing themselves to one another in that act of faith we call marriage.

Abraham heard God. He had a vivid, life-changing encounter with the Eternal One. He heard God calling him to set out on a journey to a far-off destination about which he knew nothing at all. Travel directions would be supplied as needed. Abraham had doubts, lots of doubts. Just read Genesis. —But he had an experience, too. He had had an encounter with God. And because of that, by faith, Abraham spent a lifetime on the road.

So, what is God’s call to *us*? Is God saying something today to Christ Church in Aspen as we inaugurate our *Ministry for Tomorrow* campaign? I think he is. What we are doing is something much bigger and much more important than simply raising money to remodel a church building. That would be like saying that a marriage is mainly about the beautiful bridal gown and the lovely wedding ceremony and the fancy reception that follows. We know better than that. A marriage is about two people living out a solemn commitment to one another, “for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health.” A marriage is about a man and woman hoping for a long life together and the creation of an enduring heritage — all because they have *faith*, faith in one another and faith in God.

Ministry for Tomorrow is an invitation to participate in an adventure not wildly different in kind from the one to which God invited Abraham when he called him to pack up his family and possessions and set out on a journey to an unknown place. It’s not too different from the adventure Jesus called his disciples to share with him when he came to Peter and Andrew as they were casting their nets in the Sea of Galilee and said, “*Follow me!*” They didn’t ask, “Where are you going?” They had reason to trust Jesus, so they just *went with him*. They lived the adventure of faith.

When a handful of Episcopalians from New York and Virginia and other places back East organized a church in the silver-mining boom town of Aspen in 1884, they invested themselves in an adventure in faith. And they had reason to believe. When Deaconess Lillian Crowe inspired a group of faithful women to start a movement to reorganize the Episcopal Church in Aspen in 1953, she launched an adventure in faith. (Notice, gentlemen, that it was the *ladies* who had the faith to take the lead!) That adventure produced the church where we’re worshipping this morning, and two of the wonderful women who were part of Deaconess Crowe’s little group of believing women fifty-four years ago are still on the faith journey with us: Peggy Rowland and Marian Davis.

As we launch *Ministry for Tomorrow* we’re responding to a call to believe in God who is the Lord of Tomorrow and who is calling this congregation to give substance and shape to its hope for the future. We’re going to remodel this church building *not* just as an end in itself, any more than a fancy (and expensive) wedding ceremony is ever an end in itself, but as an act of *faith in God* and *hope* for the future of our church and its ministry both to the Aspen community and to people from across the country and around the world who come here year after year, for a weekend, or six months, or to spend the rest of their lives.

If we put our faith into action, we will see our hope become reality.