

The Conviction of Things Not Seen

In the name of him who is our shield and very great reward, dear friends in Christ: Last week when we met to hear God's Word, we focused on the problem of our innate tendency toward materialism; that is, our predisposition to consider wealth, worldly possessions, and our physical comfort to be more important than striving to achieve higher spiritual values and goals – the things Jesus said would gain us eternal treasures in heaven. Listening to wise King Solomon from Ecclesiastes, we heard what a foolish and ultimately futile pursuit materialism is. This material world and everything in it is passing away. One day it will all be gone. And no matter how much you own or how rich you are, you can't buy your way out of the fact that you too have an expiration date. You are going to die. And then all those things you've accumulated will be worthless to you. So, even from a strictly worldly point of view, materialism just isn't a practical way to live. In the end, you lose.

Today's Scripture lessons up the ante, so to speak. They reveal the *spiritual* problem with materialism. St. Paul mentioned it in last week's Epistle when he warned us to put to death covetousness, which he said is idolatry. It's having a false god. What does that mean? Luther explained that your god is whatever you place your trust in, whatever it is that you look to provide your needs, your security, your comfort, your purpose, and ultimately your happiness. And this is the problem. We tend to trust in what we can see and actually lay our hands on. How do I know I'm going to be able to eat tomorrow? I've got food in the fridge and the pantry. How do I know I'll have something to wear? I've got a closet full of clothes. How do I know I'll have a place to stay warm and dry? I've got a house (or in my case, a job that provides one). How do I know I'll be safe? I've got thick doors and sturdy locks. What about next week? Well, I've got money in the bank and stores where I can buy stuff. How do I know I'll be taken care of when I'm old? I've got long term investments in a retirement plan. The more of all that stuff I've got, the more confident I feel. And because I want to feel confident, I make it my goal to get more of all that stuff. Thus that stuff becomes my god, because that's what I'm placing my trust in.

The Lord wants us to put our trust in him. *He* wants to be our God. And it's interesting that when he wanted to teach his people Israel to trust in him, he led them out into the desert where there is no food. Then he fed them one day at a time with bread from heaven that showed up each morning on the ground. They could only pick up a day's worth. Any more than that rotted over night. The goal was to get them to understand that it wasn't the bread they lived on, but rather it was the Word of God that commanded the bread to appear. They were to learn to trust not in what they could see – because they couldn't see tomorrow's bread today – but rather in their good and gracious God who promised to take care of all their needs.

All of which brings me to today's reading from Hebrews in which the inspired writer tells us that faith, saving faith that is, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*. It's trusting the Word and Promises of God to be true and certain for the past, the present, and the future in things that cannot be seen. And then we get a number of examples.

“By faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” This is amazing. We want to trust in what we can see; but here we are told that what we can see owes its existence to God's Word that can't be seen. It can be heard, though none of us were there to hear it; but the point is which has more real substance, which is more reliable: the created stuff we see, or the Word of God that created the stuff? Obviously it's the latter. It's in God's Word that our trust should be.

More examples follow; but before we get to them I want to highlight a feature they all share. It's the way faith and action go together. We often think of faith as merely a mental activity. "I believe in God." "I trust in Jesus." These are thoughts I hold in my head or that I trust in my heart. But faith is more than that. If I genuinely believe something to be true, then I'm going to act on it. If the Lord came along and said, "Tomorrow this stock that's trading at two dollars a share is going to be trading at eight. I want you to be a good steward of the funds I've entrusted to you and buy as much of that stock as you can to help underwrite a mission project I have in mind", well, you'd be a fool not to buy. That's what we see in these examples: "By faith so and so did such and such."

"By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous." Cain offered to God what he could see, namely the result of the works of his hands. He wanted to be righteous in God's sight by what he did. Abel understood things differently. He knew that as a sinner, he had nothing to offer God. But he trusted in God's forgiveness that came through the means he had provided: substitutionary sacrifice pointing ahead to the sacrifice that Christ would make on the cross. He couldn't see God's forgiveness. He couldn't see the righteousness that God imputed to him. But he trusted God's Word. So, he sacrificed his lamb. His faith led him to act. And he was commended for it.

The same principles are true for us, though they are applied differently in the New Testament period because Christ has already completed his sacrifice once and for all. But we don't gather here to offer the Lord anything. We haven't got anything worthy to give him. We gather instead to receive what *he* gives: God's Word and Promises, the washing of rebirth in Baptism, the declaration of Holy Absolution, Christ's body and blood given under bread and wine, the gift of the Holy Spirit to instill faith and to lead and guide. We don't see these things. But we trust that God grants them to us for Christ's sake. And so we act. We show up when and where God is delivering his gifts.

"By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household." Noah had never seen a flood. There's some reason to believe that he'd never seen rain. But when the Lord told him to get busy building a boat because he was going to need it, he did. For 120 years he worked on it because he believed God's Word about the coming flood – the end of the world as he knew it. By his faith he became an heir of righteousness, and by it he and his family were saved.

In the same way we know that the Lord has set a date for this wicked age to end. This time around the destruction will be by fire. We don't know when it will happen. We can't see it coming. But we trust that it's true. And we act by making sure that we are at all times safe within the ark of Christ's Holy Church, the vessel the Lord himself has built (and continues to build) to carry us through the judgment that will fall.

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going." You know the story: Abraham is 75 years old when the Lord comes to him with a long list of promises – a list of promises that seemed too good to be true and some that didn't even seem possible. But by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, Abraham believed. So, he stepped out in faith leaving behind his old country, and trusting the Lord to give him his promised but yet unseen countless descendants a new and better country

Speaking of Abraham and the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, the author of Hebrews continues, "These all died in faith, not having the things promised, but having seen and greeted

them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on earth. For people who speak thus make it clear they are seeking a homeland. ... But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”

Abraham did not see fulfilled in his lifetime the many promises the Lord made him. He saw partial fulfillment of a few, but the big three: countless descendants, possession of the Promised Land, and the greatest promise of all, that the Savior would be born of his line, not so much. The point is that he trusted in what he could not see. He knew that if the Lord said it, it must be true. And in that sense he saw it from afar, that is, by faith and not by sight. And we know that in time the Lord fulfilled all those promises.

It's meant to point us to the greater reality. Abraham's stepping out in faith, leaving his old world, living as a homeless nomad, and trusting in the Lord to give him a new and lasting inheritance is a prophetic picture of our lives. We have been called by Christ out of this world, the one that is passing away, the world that can be seen and that is full of stuff that can be seen. We've been called to set our sights on what can't yet be seen: the world to come, the world that will never end, the world that will be given as an eternal inheritance to those who trust in the Word and Promises of God. By God's grace, we believe it. May we therefore also *act* like we believe it, not attaching ourselves to the goods, the comforts, and the other idols of this age; but seeking ever more to know and to be found in our Lord, Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again in order to guarantee our everlasting inheritance. Let us live and conduct ourselves in the conviction of things not seen but that have been promised to us by God for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!