

Barre Congregational Church Outdoor Service

October 11, 2020: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost~

“Let us live our lives by faith”

Scripture Reading: Philippians 1 v 27-30 and Hebrews 11v 1-11

I. Introduction:

As I was watching the workmen outside our house this past week, fixing the huge electrical problem that resulted from a tree that came down and damaged the cables attached to our house, I found it amazing to see how they knew what to do, step by step. I imagine them looking at the problem, discussing it among themselves as well as the different parties to the problem, the ones who had to identify the overall issue, those who came to remove the tree very carefully, and then those who removed the damaged telephone pole and cables, and replaced them with new ones. I imagine them envisioning a situation that all of us on our street would have our power back, because they would put into action a plan with different parts to it and could see it being resolved. I asked the manager of the team how they knew it would work out? His answer was, “Oh, we know, we know”, with a nice laugh! That is faith in their plan, their work, and the outcome, even though they did not see it at first.

II. Common Insights about Faith:

As we go through things in life; learn from one another’s stories about the good things as well as the not so good, and how everyone is coping, praying, hoping for the best outcome for our particular situations, as well as what is going on around us; and when one reads about all the Biblical stories with the same kinds of struggles and hopes, what strikes me is that we all want to get to the other side of these experiences intact, maybe better, and to maybe see a transformation of our circumstances, just like the situation with the downed tree and restoration of electrical power. We all want to have that kind of certainty that things will be better, maybe different. In spiritual terms, we talk about having faith inside of us to know that things will be better, because of God’s promise to help us through difficult times.

III. Paul to the Philippians

Last week we saw how Paul instructed the Philippians to make their requests known to God through prayer, and then to feel the peace of God come over them. This week we hear him say

to them, “Let us live our lives by faith”. In Chapter 1 verse 27 he tells them, in the face of their challenges, “I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one person for the faith of the gospel”. This appeal to them is consistent with what he had been asking all the congregations, that is, to stay together as One Body, and to remain faithful in Christ, who is the Head of the Body. He encourages them to be steadfast in God in everything, be focused and not be distracted by anything that pulls them away from God, and to hold on to their faith. In addition, they needed to know that faith is not without suffering, and that they needed to stand firm despite it all.

IV. Biblical figures and their faith

In Hebrews 11 verse 1, the writer first tells the congregation what faith is about, saying “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Then he goes on to give examples of ancient biblical figures and how they managed to get through their journeys with God. These include Noah, Abraham Enoch, and others to demonstrate their calling by God, God’s promise to be with them and give them what they needed. In the case of Abraham, whom we had focused on in the past, we read in verse 8 how he was called by God to leave his home country, and to travel to a new land which would be his inheritance, and settle there. By faith he did as God asked him to do.

This morning I want to focus on a biblical figure who does not appear in this passage with all the others, and that is Hannah, the mother of Samuel. As we know, Elkanah had two wives, one of them being Hannah, who had no children. Peninnah did have children. We see in 1 Samuel 1 how Hannah wept, was filled with bitterness as she was praying to God to change her circumstances. She was authentic in her emotions as she prayed this prayer, “O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant, but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head...I am a woman who is deeply troubled, and I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief”. Eli, the priest witnessed her praying from her heart. He could not hear her, but saw her lips moving. He then said to her, “Go in peace and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him”. After she prayed in that authentic way, she fell pregnant and gave birth to Samuel. Like Mary, the Mother of Jesus, she then broke into what was called Hannah’s prayer where she rejoices in the Lord, called God Holy and her Rock, and then speaks about how the Lord will shatter those who oppose God, and how those who are

humbled will be exalted. Hannah and all these OT figures called upon God in faith to help guide them and change their circumstances. Their lives were transformed beyond their wildest dreams, and they experienced God's presence in remarkable ways.

V. So, what is faith, then?

I mentioned to you in a previous sermon that, according to Richard Phillips in the Reformed Commentary on Hebrews, the eleventh Chapter of the Book of Hebrews is what 1 Corinthians 13 is to love. He says that the fate of Christians hinges on their faith. By faith we begin what we will ultimately possess and see. In other words, faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see, according to verse 1 of Hebrews 11. The key word that gives expression to this certainty is the Greek word, hypostasis. It speaks about faith that holds the key to something that is promised, something real and substantial we hope for, but what can't be seen yet. Both Abraham and Hannah's experiences are about that faith and trust in God to, on the one hand, keep God's promise in the case of Abraham, and on the other hand, to reveal God's power through trusting prayer, in the case of Hannah. It is about a conviction, a confidence that what cannot be seen, is there, because you hope for it. Phillips continues saying that faith is the attitude we have toward our circumstances, especially when things look uncertain. Faith is to believe that things are different from what they seem to be. One of the best ways of saying it, I read is "Those who put their faith in God and God's word, and not in this world and the evidence the world presents, are those whom God receives".

VI. Conclusion:

So, faith is about seeing how God sees things. If the worldly evidence says, things are just the way they are, or are impossible, through God's eyes, things are different, they are possible, they are good and miraculous. If collectively we all hold faith up as the key to what we hope for, even though we do not see it yet, what a world it would be. Our internet, phone and cable service have not been restored yet, so I am curious to ask the same question to those technicians! During this pandemic where a lot of services are delayed, I am sure that their answer would sound like this, "We have a lot on our plate these days, but we believe in what we do, and you will have your service back." May Gods help us to develop a faith like that, and of Abraham and Noah and Hannah and many more. Amen