

Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-10

Theme: Faith Is the Essential Characteristic of a Christian

Date: August 19, 2007 (School Opening)

In the Name of Jesus. Dear Christians Friends,

What is it that enables you to say that you are a Christian? Is it that you dutifully go to church on each week? Is it perhaps that you pray regularly? Is it the fact that you give your free-will offerings? Or might your ability to identify yourself as a Christian be based on your love and kindness for other people? *What is it that enables you to identify yourself as a Christian?* The answer, as God's Word teaches us, is not church attendance, it is not based on the number of our prayers or the amount of our offerings or even our love for others; the answer is faith. St. Paul told the Galatians, *"The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."* (Gal. 5:6b) And here in Hebrews 11, the author asserts, *"Without faith it is impossible to please God."* (11:6a) The Bible consistently teaches that we are saved through faith. It's through faith in Jesus that we can identify ourselves as Christians.

But what is faith? Here in Hebrews 11 we have the Bible's definition of faith: **NOW FAITH IS BEING SURE OF WHAT WE HOPE FOR AND CERTAIN OF WHAT WE DO NOT SEE.** At first hearing that may sound like a contradiction. If you're hoping for something, how can you be sure of it? And if you can't see something, how can you be certain of it? To a great many people, the answer is, *"You can't for seeing is believing."* But as Christians we are sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Our certainty comes from our faith in what God has told us in his Word. The Bible says Jesus is God's Son. It says that he laid down his life to redeem a world of sinners. The Bible says that Jesus, who lived and died as our substitute, rose from his tomb on the third day. It says that Jesus alone is the way to the Father and that Jesus is coming again to take his believers to heaven. We haven't seen any of these things with our physical eyes, but we're sure about them and certain of them by faith.

Understand, now, that saving faith isn't just a matter of knowing the facts of Bible history. Faith is a personal trust, a confidence or certainty, that Jesus, God's Son, is my Savior, the one who lived and died as my Substitute and who rose bodily from the dead. Anyone who has such faith, the Bible says, is saved. And anyone who does not believe will be condemned. **That's how essential faith is.** And, as Hebrews 11 tells us, faith, this essential characteristic of a Christian, enables us to know who we are, why we're here, and where we're going.

1. By faith we know who we are

Is the name Stephen Hawking familiar to you? It may not be, but he's a physicist and a professor at the University of Cambridge in England. For many years he's suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease which has virtually paralyzed him. He can speak only with the assistance of machines. Yet he's world-renowned for his brilliant mind. But this brilliant man once said this, *"We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special."* Let me ask you: How does that make you feel about who you are and your place in the universe? An accident, right? And an unimportant one at that! Your existence is a cosmic fluke, according to Mr. Hawking.

Thankfully there is a more reliable source from which to gain the most basic understanding of our universe. It's here in Hebrews 11:3: **BY FAITH WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE UNIVERSE WAS FORMED AT GOD'S COMMAND, SO THAT WHAT IS SEEN WAS NOT MADE OUT OF WHAT WAS VISIBLE.** No accident there. The Bible asserts here that the universe of space and time came into being by a special act of divine creation. God decided to create this universe and then applied his limitless wisdom and power to the creative task. But he needed no schematics or supplies. He just spoke and it came to be. And what goes along with this is the understanding that the rest of what God reveals in his Word about Creation is also reliable; that God made Adam and Eve in his own image, that they were to rule over every living creature, and that God established marriage, home, and family when he created Eve and brought her to Adam. As Isaiah said, *"Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand."* (64:8)

Creation is an article of faith in what God tells us about who we are, redeemed children of God. One of God's children, who is affectionately known as the "father of believers" also knew who he was. Abraham, a child of God, the father of all believers, knew who he was but he also knew why he was here.

2. By faith we know why we're here

In the words of our text the Bible says, BY FAITH ABRAHAM, WHEN CALLED TO GO TO A PLACE HE WOULD LATER RECEIVE AS HIS INHERITANCE, OBEYED AND WENT, EVEN THOUGH HE DID NOT KNOW WHERE HE WAS GOING. The reference here is to Genesis 12 near the beginning of the story of Abraham, where it says, *"The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'" (12:1)* The LORD then made a seven-part promise to Abraham and after that the next thing we read is, *"So Abram left..." (12:4)*

I guess they can do that to you in the Army—tell you to get up and go and not tell you exactly where you're going. And I suppose the Assignment Committee of the WELS does something like that with our teacher and pastor candidates. But this was 2000 BC. This was an age completely lacking in the marvels of modern transportation and a time when a person's tribe and clan were all important. But God said **GO** and Abraham went. He obeyed. In fact, Abraham's life was characterized by such obedience of faith. Later on in his life the LORD says to Abraham, *"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there*

as a burnt offering...” How, as a father, do you cope with such a command? Yet the Bible says that *“early the next morning”* Abraham saddled his donkey and took two of his servants and his son, Isaac, and set out for the region of Moriah.

Can you imagine what a person without faith would have said to these commands? Leave home at the age of 75? Give up my land, my servants my comfortable surroundings? It’s a dangerous world out there and, besides, you haven’t told me where you want me to go. Sacrifice my son?! Is that what you’re asking of me? I’ve waited 100 years for him and now you want me to kill him? What kind of a faith enables a person to know and believe that God has everything in my life under control? There’s no doubt about it, saving faith makes all the difference. In each case, saving faith led to obedience. Abraham came to see that he was here on this earth not simply to live life according to his own will, but to serve the LORD and follow his will. And in his life of serving God, he was sustained by God’s promises.

What if God, this week, conducted a review of his people and came up to you and asked, “What are you doing here?” How would you answer? Unfortunately, there are too many people who wouldn’t be able muster much of an answer. A fair-sized segment of the world lives by the frat boy mentality: I’m just here to have fun. Another good-sized segment makes the mistake that King Solomon in last week’s Old Testament lesson told us he made. They engage in toilsome labor under the sun, piling up possessions and accomplishments, but gradually come to the despair-inducing realization that their work doesn’t love them back and they’re going to have to leave all they’ve amassed to the one who comes after them. And then there’s the portion of the population that has no clue what they’re doing here—they’ve never thought deeply about it.

But by faith we know why we’re here. We know that we’re here to serve God. Jesus said, *“Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”* For however long he gives us life and breath, we’re his to command. Through all the changing scenes of life our only question is, *“How do I glorify him best right now?”* If I’m employed or unemployed, If I’m in school or in the work force, If I’m married or if I’ve lost a spouse, If I’m raising a family or waiting to begin my family. Faith, saving faith, enables us to confidently say with the hymn writer: *“Take my moments and my days, Let them flow in ceaseless praise.”* Abraham obeyed and went, the Bible says. He went to the land of Canaan, the land God promised to him and his descendants. But Abraham also knew that by faith he was headed for an even better country.

3. By faith we know where we’re going

In the words of our text the Bible describes the faith-driven actions of Abraham with these words: BY FAITH HE MADE HIS HOME IN THE PROMISED LAND LIKE A STRANGER IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY; HE LIVED IN TENTS, AS DID ISAAC AND JACOB, WHO WERE HEIRS WITH HIM OF THE SAME PROMISE; FOR HE WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO THE CITY WITH FOUNDATIONS, WHOSE ARCHITECT AND BUILDER IS GOD. If you’re a camper maybe you spent part of this summer sleeping in tents. And most of us, I’d guess, were only too happy to get back home to nice, solid homes and our comfortable beds. Abraham, by contrast, lived in a tent his whole life. This tent-life was a constant reminder that he hadn’t yet received even a corner of Canaan to call his own. But rather than cause for bitterness or disappointment with God, this nomad’s life was fine with Abraham, because he knew where he was going. He was going to the promised land—not the one that lies between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River—but the one in heaven, the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith we have that same confidence. Earth is a desert drear, heaven is my home. With the apostle Paul we confess, *“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ...”* (Php. 3:20) We have a Savior who knew where he was going too: To be born, to live, to die, and to rise again.

Do you see, then, how essential faith is in the life of a Christian? First and foremost, by faith we trust that Jesus has rescued us from sin and death and given us heaven. We know who we are and why we’re here and where we’re going. But maybe you’re thinking, *“But I’m not Abraham and my faith may not be as strong as Abraham’s. I tend to forget whom God has made me. I lose track too often of why I’m here. And, I confess, I lose sight of where I’m going.”* If you’re thinking that way, then I want you to realize that Abraham wasn’t a self-made believer. His faith wasn’t his accomplishment; it was God’s gift. Abraham’s faith got its start with God’s promises and his faith was sustained and strengthened as he heard and remembered God’s promises. It works the same way with us. *“Faith comes from hearing the message,”* the Bible says, *“and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”* (Rom. 10:17)

And isn’t that what Christian education is all about, hearing the message through the Word of Christ. By God’s grace Faith Lutheran School will be opening its doors for the 46th time to welcome in the little lambs of God’s flock. In our classrooms under the direction of faithful and dedicated Christian teachers our children will be taught who they are – redeemed children of God; why they are here on earth – to bring glory to God’s name; and where they are going – eternal life in heaven through faith in Jesus. Our children learn many things in our elementary school but far and above everything else faith in Jesus is the essential characteristic in their life as young Christians.

Do you want a stronger faith, a faith like Abraham’s? Then do what the author of Hebrews encourages in the next chapter: *“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”* (12:2) With his promises of love and his pledge of forgiveness, Jesus will increase our faith so that we can live in the sureness of things we hope for and the certainty of things we haven’t seen. Amen.