

Sermon for December 31, 2017 – New Year's Eve

Hebrew 11:1-2, 8-16 (EHV)

Theme: Faith is a God-given confidence . . .

- 1) . . . *anchored in God's promises.*
- 2) . . . *that changes your life.*

Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see. ² For by this faith the ancients were commended in Scripture. . .⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance, and he left without knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he lived as a stranger in the Promised Land, as if it did not belong to him, dwelling in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith Abraham also received the ability to conceive children, even though Sarah herself was barren and he was past the normal age, because he considered him faithful who made the promise. ¹² And so from one man, and he as good as dead, descendants were born as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand along the seashore. ¹³ One by one, all of these died in faith, without having received the things that were promised, but they saw and welcomed them from a distance. They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴ Indeed, people who say things like that make it clear that they are looking for a land of their own. ¹⁵ And if they were remembering the land they had come from, they would have had an opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better land—a heavenly one. For that reason, God is not ashamed to be called their God, because he prepared a city for them.

Are you fearful of the future? I guess it depends where you find yourself in life. If you are about to graduate, get married, have a child, start a new career or retire, I would imagine that you are rather excited for the future. At the same time, if you are struggling financially, growing sick, elderly, or just an avid news buff – you might be very fearful of what the coming year holds.

The LORD wants us neither to be fearful of the future, nor find our joy only in the earthly experiences that may come our way. What he desires, rather, is that we look beyond time – remembering that we are merely pilgrims on this earth. God wants us to live our lives in faith.

And what exactly does living our lives in faith mean? Let us let Scripture answer that question for us this morning, under the theme: **Faith is a God-given confidence: 1) anchored in God's promises 2) that changes your life.**

Part One: Faith is a God-given confidence anchored in God's promises.

Before we go on to explain what it means to live our lives in faith, we need to define what faith is. Most Americans seem to define it merely as a wish, hunch or hope. Faith, however, is far more than that. Faith is a God-given confidence, as our sermon text explains:

Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see.

In order to understand this passage, let us consider it backwards. First of all, how can we be convinced of the things we do not see? Simple. There are many things we do not see and yet know exist, for example atoms. I have never seen an atom, have you? No, no one has. How, then, do we know that atoms exist if no one has ever seen them? We believe they exist based on the evidence in nature and science. Our “belief” that atoms exist is more than just a mere “wish”. No, it is a confidence. This confidence is faith.

But Biblical faith even goes farther than *being convinced about things we do not see* – like atoms. It is also *being sure about what we hope for*. And what, exactly, are the unseen things we hope for? The forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection from the dead, and eternal life with LORD. Simply stated, the unseen things Christians hope in all confidence to receive is everything God promises us in Scripture.

Now it needs to be said that a person’s “faith” is only as strong as the person or object he places it in. For example, I could convince myself that I am strong enough to stop a speeding freight train all by myself by standing in front of it. Such a faith is worthless. Why? Because no matter how much I may believe in myself, I am definitely not strong enough to stop a speeding freight train; but God is.

In other words, the “power” of faith is not found in the “act” of believing itself. It’s found, rather, in the one who we believe. The object of our faith – the LORD’s love, wisdom, and strength - is what gives our faith it’s wonderful power – moving believers to do amazing things by giving them an amazing hope; as our text says: ² *For by this faith the ancients were commended in Scripture.*

Do you want an example of what God-given faith can accomplish in a believer’s life? Consider the father of faith himself: Abraham

⁸ *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance, and he left without knowing where he was going.* I know that some in the congregation have gone on “mystery trips” – visiting surprise locations on a tour. Mystery trips are one thing, but could you imagine “mystery moving”: uprooting your entire household to move away from Kewaunee to some unknown place hundreds of miles away– never to return to this city again? That is what Abraham did. Why? Because the LORD called him to do it – promising that he would be with him and bless him with many descendants in this new land – the foremost of which would be the Savior. These wonderful promises awakened faith in Abraham's heart – that is to say, they awakened a confidence in him that moved him to act – convinced that the LORD would accomplish everything he promised.

⁹ *By faith he lived as a stranger in the Promised Land, as if it did not belong to him, dwelling in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.* ¹⁰ *For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

Even though Abraham, his son Isaac and grandson Jacob lived in the land God swore to give them, they lived their entire lives as strangers in that land – waiting for God to fulfill his promise. But their hope was not only to inherit the land of Canaan, it was also in the promised Messiah – who would win the forgiveness they needed to stand before God. Yes, more important to them than an earthly inheritance was God’s promise of eternal life with him in heaven. Their confidence in what the coming Christ would accomplish was the motivating force in their lives – moving them to endure all sorts of trials, uncertainties and hardship because their faith was anchored in God’s promises.

¹¹ By faith Abraham also received the ability to conceive children, even though Sarah herself was barren and he was past the normal age, because he considered him faithful who made the promise.

¹² And so from one man, and he as good as dead, descendants were born as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand along the seashore.

One of the hardest promises for Abraham to believe, was that he, being so old, would have a son through Sarah. Nature told him that it was impossible! And yet, reassured by the LORD’s reminders of his promise, Abraham trusted that the LORD had the power to do the impossible. If God said he would have children, Abraham was confident that he would have children – especially considering the fact that the promise of the Savior was so closely tied to him having a son.

And God was faithful to that promise. Even though Abraham only experienced a partial fulfillment with the birth of Isaac, God did make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. How so? Not only by having his grandson’s descendants grow into the mighty nation of Israel, but, more importantly, by sending the Savior, through whom everyone who believes is also counted as a descendant of Abraham; as the Scriptures say: ⁷ *Understand, then, that those who believe are the children of Abraham.* ⁱ

Yes, as the example of Abraham shows, faith is a God-given confidence that anchors itself in God’s promises – especially the promise of the Savior. Because the LORD does what he promises, your faith is powerful. It is the channel through which God gives you his promised blessings of forgiveness, life and salvation. It is the means by which God transforms your life.

Part Two: Faith is a God-given confidence that changes your life.

Regarding the God’s Old Testament believers, the author of Hebrews writes:

¹³ One by one, all of these died in faith, without having received the things that were promised, but they saw and welcomed them from a distance. They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴ Indeed, people who say things like that make it clear that they are looking for a land of their own. ¹⁵ And if they were remembering the land they had come from, they would have had an opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better land—a heavenly one.

Confidence in Christ has a profound impact on how a person lives. Unbelievers live as if this world and what it offers is all that matters. Because of this they are extremely happy when things go well, and incredibly anxious when things don’t.

Christians, on the other hand, understand that this life is not eternal, nor this earth our permanent home. God has promised us something better in Christ – eternal life with him on a perfect earth, which will stand under a new heaven that Jesus will create for us on the last day. Because we are confident God will give us this new home for Christ sake, we have no reason to be anxious about anything. Even though the evil that happens all around us every day saddens us, we shouldn't worry or fret like everyone else. And why not? Because our future is secure in Christ.

Imagine seeing a child walk home on a cold winter day – skipping and smiling while moving briskly forward. Why is he happy? Because he's headed home – knowing that his Dad will have a nice fire built and his Mom some hot cocoa waiting for him when he gets home. The thought of relaxing with his family cheers him as he walks through the biting wind.

Not so the person who doesn't have a destination, but looks for any kind of sanctuary from the wind and snow. He is worried sick about what he is experiencing. Worse yet, he will die if he doesn't find shelter from the cold. Such is the sad state of many, who only live for the present on this sin cursed earth, instead of looking forward to the eternal home God the Father prepared for us in Christ.

Christians, on the other hand, can live their lives in confidence – unaffected by the evils that surround them. Why? Because they know where they are going: home to their Father, and all the blessings he has prepared for us through Jesus' work of redeeming us.

And as believers confidently walk home – not allowing all the coldness and evil they experience in this life to prevent them from finding joy in what awaits them in Christ – God the Father finds joy in their faith, as the last verse of our text indicates: *For that reason, God is not ashamed to be called their God, because he prepared a city for them.*

Yes, we are but strangers here. Heaven is our home. For this reason, don't worry about the trials the new year might bring. Don't hang your hat on life's triumphs either. Rather, in all things, look to God in faith – confident that he will do everything he promised. Believe what God's Word says: *The world and its desires pass away, but the one who does the will of God remains forever.*ⁱⁱ Amen.

ⁱ Galatians 3:7 (EHV)

ⁱⁱ 1 John 2:17 (EHV)