

Faith is a word that is often used and misused. We use the word 'faith' in our culture. I think of the songs from my youth. Eddie Money: "You gotta' have faith." Billy Joel: "I've been keepin' the faith." Journey: "I'll be yours, faithfully." We throw the word faith around. We also use the words "believe" and "belief" which are the same thing as "faith," at least as far as the New Testament is concerned. And yet, though we use the words a lot, faith and belief are often misunderstood.

One of the biggest mistakes we make is to equate "faith" and "belief" with some kind of fuzzy headed wishful thinking. "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows." Gag. That's utter and total nonsense. There are a lot more raindrops than flowers in the world. That notion of faith is *garbáge* of the highest order.

We also make the mistake of saying, "It doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you believe something." Blech. 'I believe that there are spaceships orbiting around a comet that will take us all away to a new and wonderful place.' Puh-lease!

We also make the mistake of thinking that faith is rather childish and immature. Faith is something you grow out of when you mature. On my bookshelf I have the multi volume history of civilization by Will and Ariel Durant. It's a great set. But if you look at the titles, you have Volume 4: "The Age of Faith." But then, later on, Volume 7: "The Age of Reason Begins." The implicit message—as you mature, reason replaces faith. No, no, no. Faith is not something you can discard. It's not a stage you grow out of.

With all of these misconceptions, it's important to know what faith is. Because, faith is vitally important for the Christian life. It's at the very heart of our walk with God.

So, what is faith? The classic Biblical definition is given in our Epistle lesson today from Hebrews ch11. This is so important to understand and to live into. For the rest of the sermon we're going to focus in on just the first 3 verses of ch11:

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible."

Okay, we might need to unpack it a bit. Let's work through it piece by piece.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for." At first, that seems like a very strange juxtaposition: assurance, and hope.

Hope by itself can seem like naive optimism. 'Oh, I hope everything will turn out all right. I hope things will work out in the future.' That seems like nebulous and vague wishful thinking.

But notice what Hebrews says. Faith is more than hope. Faith is the ASSURANCE of things hoped for. Assurance. That's a very concrete word. That's a word that brings things down to earth.

In fact, the Greek word, *hypostasis*, is a very strong, solid word. Hypostasis means groundwork, or foundation, or essence, or reality, or substance. It's a very strong word.

To say that faith is the assurance of hope takes it out of the realm of fuzzy wishful thinking. Faith is the basis of hope. It's the groundwork. Faith gives substance to our hopes. This is not naïveté. This is real stuff.

In other words, faith is not believing in something that you know ain't so. Instead, faith is believing in something real. Faith is the ASSURANCE of things hoped for.

Hebrews continues: Faith is also "the conviction of things not seen." Again, a very strong word is used. The word "conviction" is *elenchos*. Elenchos is a legal term. It means evidence or proof. Faith is the conviction of things not seen. Faith makes us certain of realities that we do not perceive with our senses.

This is so very important. Because so often, we restrict reality to the things we can see, touch, taste, hear and feel. But reality is far greater than what we can perceive with our senses.

Our senses can be fooled. That's how magicians make a living. The same goes for professional wrestling, or special effects in movies. Just because you can see it doesn't mean it's real. And just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not real.

What does that mean in your day to day life? For the writer of Hebrews, it means EVERYTHING. God is real, whether you know it or not.

So how do you live your life? How do you make your decisions? Based upon God's reality? Or based upon the much narrower smaller realities you can sense? That's an important question to ask.

You have an opportunity to make some money. In the world of the senses, anything goes. You do whatever it takes to make a buck. But if you're living with one foot in the greater spiritual reality of God, you have to ask, is this a good way to make money? Will people get hurt by my actions? Am I doing what God would have me do?

You have an opportunity to indulge in a pleasurable activity. In the world of the senses, pleasure is an end in itself. But if you're living God's larger reality, you have to ask, is this a good thing? Are there unpleasant consequences for me or others?

Those are very important questions to ask. Because to be a person of faith means keeping one foot in the surface reality of this world. But the other foot has to be planted in God's deeper reality. The reality of things hoped for. The certainty of realities we do not see.

Hebrews continues: "Indeed, by faith, or our ancestors received approval." In other words, living by faith is pleasing to God. God approved of our spiritual ancestors who were with him in a relationship of faith. What does that mean for us?

Well, for one thing, it means that pleasing God is much more important than pleasing other people. God comes first in the pecking order.

We don't always live that way. We don't always arrange our lives with God coming first. God is often an afterthought. Prayer and worship are often optional activities that get squeezed out by other things.

Yet, living by faith means pleasing God, paying attention to God, spending time with God, is of the utmost importance.

It also means that trusting God is of the highest priority. In the New Testament, faith, belief, and trust are all the same word. To have faith is to trust in God. To believe is to trust in God.

By faith our ancestors received approval. By trusting God, our ancestors received approval. Why? Let's look at it from opposite direction.

What are the strongest accusations we make against each other? 'I can't trust you. You don't trust me, do you? I've lost trust in you. I don't believe you.'

What is one of the worst things that can happen in a marriage? When one partner is unfaithful. Lack of trust, lack of faithfulness is deadly in a relationship. Conversely, the presence of trust, the presence of faith, is essential for a relationship.

That's why having faith in God is pleasing to God. Not having faith, not walking in faith, not trusting God is detrimental to the relationship.

Not living 'in faith' is saying, "Lord, I really like you. But I'm not going to trust you with everything. I don't want to put all my eggs into your basket. I need to keep my options open and myself safe." No, no, no. To have faith is to trust God in all aspects of our life. Those who trust God receive approval.

Hebrews continues: "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible." In other words, behind creation is God. The world did not spring up on its own. What is visible was created by the invisible God.

As near as our human astrophysicists can figure out, the universe apparently began in a Big Bang about 13.7 billion years ago. That's all well and good. But by faith, also we understand the deeper reality: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'

"By faith, we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God." By faith we acknowledge God's incredible power, the power to create the universe by his word.

So what does it mean for us to have faith? From v3: To be a person of faith is to acknowledge the power of God who has created everything. From v2: To be a person of faith is to live in a trusting relationship with that God. From v1: To be a person of faith is to live with one foot in the world that we sense around us, never forgetting the greater and deeper reality of God.

There are some branches of Christianity that are very focused on the moment of conversion. "Are you saved? Do you believe in Jesus Christ" Nothing wrong with that. But that's only a beginning.

Living in faith and trust is a process and a journey. It is not a destination in itself. No one can claim to have faith all wrapped up and packaged. You must continually renew your trust in the living God.

Our Episcopal worship allows many opportunities to do that. Of course, the great danger for us is that we're often on auto-pilot. We often mouth the words without thinking about them or meaning them.

But when we say the Creed, we have the opportunity to again proclaim that we believe IN God, that we trust IN God. When we confess our sins we have the opportunity to remove those things that stand in the way of our relationship with God. When we come to the altar for Communion, we have the opportunity to ask God to be spiritually and physically a part of us.

God wants that intimate relationship with you.

God is real. Believe in him.

God is powerful. Trust in him.

God is loving. Have faith in him.