

“Ours is a Living Faith” based on Hebrews 11:1-16, David Jahnke, 8/8/10

I had a delightful conversation with a rigorously protestant member of our congregation the other day. She had been talking at the swimming pool about her service at our church with someone who happened to be catholic. Her acquaintance told her with a smile that she would head straight to heaven when her time came. My friend said that she was not so sure about that and that it certainly would have nothing to do with her own good works. Her friend nodded her head and said, "Oh absolutely, it would."

After hearing this story, I think I may have shocked my friend by saying, "I think our catholic friends are actually right about this one..."

Now this is *not* because we can earn our salvation or save ourselves which we cannot. It is only because saving faith is necessarily lived out. Faith is never a free pass into heaven after living as we please.

Our passage from Hebrews cites many examples of faith lived out: “By faith Noah condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” Faith led Noah (and us) to condemn a horribly violent, broken world. The prevalence of broken-ness is what my good protestant friend and her forefathers, Martin Luther and John Calvin knew very well. We cannot fix the world or ourselves. Only the work of God can save us. And we access the work of God through faith.

But Noah’s faith in God’s Word led to right action which was part and parcel of God’s saving him. If he had not built the ark...And so too does our growing faith in God necessarily lead to a growing righteousness- a growing participation in the saving Works of God, including the work God wants to do in us.

Abel as well was commended as a righteous man because of his faith. His faith led him to offer a better sacrifice. Faith opens us to receive more of what God and life have to offer. And faith drives us to offer more of ourselves to God. We live better- more fully, more joyfully, more givingly— as we develop our faith in God.

How does this work? Hebrews provides a wonderful definition of faith that shows us how faith leads to better living. “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see...” As we gradually become more sure of what we hope for— and what everyone really hopes for is eternal life, health and peace; as we become certain of what we do not see— the presence of the divine all around us— these bring peace to our otherwise troubled minds and fulfillment to our otherwise restless spirits. Anxiety fades away as Spirit fills us up.

And the two classic means of becoming sure of God’s presence and our eternal hopes are: 1. reading about God, and 2. closing our eyes in prayer in order to relate to the unseen. While we access God’s saving work through faith, we access faith through God’s Word and Spirit discovered in study and prayer.

Now since faith involves being convinced of what is unseen, it is no great surprise that faith has been on the decline during the modern era. We have grown to view the world and understand reality only through what our senses can take in. And the “unseen” was thought to be a farce or unreliable— certainly unknowable.

And yet as we move from the reductionism of the modern mind— which itself has led to greater awareness of the “unseen”; but as we move to the openness of the post-modern mind, new possibilities are emerging. The deep human longing for transcendent meaning and spiritual awareness, which faded but never died even in the modern era, is blossoming once again.

Some neurological researchers are suggesting our brains are actually wired for faith. Think of the prevalence of religion throughout human history. Meditation and prayer actually activate critical portions of our brains. And remember that wondering about the world was a religious inclination which eventually gave birth to science. And I think that when we give these natural capacities space to breathe through faith and prayer, we find an entire world opening up to us; an invisible world which underlies everything. We begin a journey into the Kingdom of God.

We see this in Abraham whose prayer allowed him to hear God's call to go on a journey. By faith he obeyed and went and made his home in the promised land just as we journey and make our home in the invisible Kingdom come as well.

Now our unseen home is one that we are familiar with from a very early age. I came across an interesting blog by Jim Barringer the other day.

My pastor and his wife have a baby, Grace, who everyone agrees is the cutest baby ever born. At Chili's after church tonight, one of the teens was playing peekaboo with her. You know what peekaboo is like for babies; they think it's the coolest thing in the world when the person reappears, and they never get bored of it.

That's because children come into the world with no concept of object permanence, the idea that things continue to exist even when the child can't see them. Child psychologist Jean Piaget did the groundbreaking work in this area, demonstrating that most children master this concept sometime in the second year of their lives. Prior to that, as far as they are concerned, nothing in the world exists if they're not looking at it at that precise moment.

While I was busy writing the first draft of a short story [about this], my girlfriend asked, "Why do you think God allowed children to be born like that? Why is object permanence something he makes us learn?"

It's a brilliant question, with an even more brilliant answer. Being born without object permanence means that, whether we're conscious of it or not, almost the first thing we learn in our lives is that something can exist even if we don't see it. Does that idea sound familiar to you? It's the most crucial building block for having faith in God. Pretty much everything else that we do in the first two years of our life is instinct: crying when we're hungry, when we've soiled our diapers, when we want attention, when we don't even know what's wrong because we're not used to these fickle bodies yet. All of that is instinct that is not learned or taught. But object permanence is, for most humans, [one of the very first things that they learn all on their own] and it opens the door to understanding the existence of God.

How brilliant on God's part that he has so engineered us that, even before we're capable of articulating thoughts about God, he is already guiding us toward knowledge of him by faith. Jim Barringer

<http://burnsidewriters.com/2009/11/24/wired-for-faith/>

So what happens to this natural inclination to believe in an unseen world? What comes naturally when we are young demands a lot more spiritual work as we grow up. Again, I think that doubt is more prevalent than ever, even among the religious. So the author of Hebrews wants to bring us back to a simple foundation of faith. He says, "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was [made out of what was unseen.]"

I remember that even when I was in the midst of declining faith in my late teens, I was discussing religion, one of our favorite subjects with my friend who was already an atheist. I said, "I still believe in God because it just makes more sense to me that something caused everything to be— rather than there being no cause..." He replied with his annoying logic, "According to that logic, the question is just pushed back to, "Who created God? Either the universe or God just happened to exist and I choose the universe."

Well God did not just happen to be. God is Being who always was, is and will be. God is infinite and eternal—the creator of finite space and time. And if we can believe in an unseen creator (which a lot of spiritually ambivalent people accept), is it such a leap to believe that the same unseen presence sustains, fills and governs the material universe? If God is beyond what he created, is it really a stretch to think he is interested and involved in where it is going?

And beyond that, choosing Kingdom virtues— service, mercy, love, peace— means choosing God. As we live morally and sacrificially, we are revealing what we believe in— including the unseen. And we expect this will bring us some sort of reward. Here is the thing about such an amorphous faith-- it can be solidified, unified and empowered by seeking God's presence in Word and prayer. This is how we receive the spiritual rewards of awareness and growing hope.

This is not easy because it means gradually sacrificing the material world to which we are so connected. It means that learning that everything, ourselves included, is to be aimed at and offered to the presence all around and to the better country that lies ahead. It means becoming sojourners and tent-dwellers here because we are citizens of another city. It means always moving forward in faith, drawn by the light and the life of that heavenly city which twinkles from a distance upon the unseen eternal spark within us all. To the light of all life; to the eternal Word and Spirit of God be all the glory and the power now and forevermore.

