

“By Faith”

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary)

May 15, 2022

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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Back in March, the Session held its annual retreat at Montreat.  
First time in three years that we'd been able to do this.

The elders were arriving, and they were telling the person at the front desk of Assembly Inn that they were with Westminster Presbyterian, in Greenville...and she would give them their room key, show them where the dining hall was.

I was sitting on a bench nearby to welcome the elders as they arrived. And during a break in the action, this employee at Montreat came over to me.

She said, “Are you the pastor of Westminster?”  
“Yes.”

She said, “My parents were missionaries in Korea. Westminster Presbyterian in Greenville was the congregation that gave them their financial support through the years that they were there. I was just a little girl then, she said, but growing up, I heard about Westminster. I knew all about your church, and the importance of your church in my parents' ministry. Thank you for what you did for my family.”

Well—she wasn't thanking me.  
She was thanking YOU!

I've been thinking about what that woman said ever since.  
And I wanted to share it with you today...this celebratory day, this glorious occasion in the life of our church.

What that woman shared with me was a testimony to the difference that this church has made in so many peoples' lives. It was a testimony to the faith that has been passed down in this place through the years.

In fact, that's what I want to talk with you about right now.

Faith.

What it means to have faith.

What our faith has looked like through the years at Westminster.

In our text from Hebrews today, the writer is talking about that very subject: faith.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” he writes. “Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval...By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called...”

I'm reminded of something Mark Twain once said about faith.

I'm not sure of the exact quote, but it went something like this:

*I admire the serene assurance of that man's religious faith.*

*He's as confident as a Presbyterian with four aces!*

Now what Twain was talking about was looking ahead, confidence in the future. But what's fascinating about the way that Hebrews describes faith is that the writer begins NOT by looking forward in faith, but by looking back.

He starts with the past.

He starts with what he knows about God and the way God has worked through ancestors of faith in the past.

I think that's an important place for us to start today as well.

Will you spend a couple minutes with me, visiting our past?

As Sue Inman wrote in her marvelous history of our church:

“When the twenty-three members of First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina, met together in May 1947 to discuss the possibility of forming a church on the outskirts of town, in the growing Augusta Street area, they could hardly have dreamed of the daughter church that stands here today.”<sup>1</sup>

How has that daughter church expressed its faith through the years?

First and foremost, Westminster has maintained a commitment to excellence in worship, to outreach and mission, to dynamic Christian education.

This congregation has prized intellectual curiosity and intelligence as a part of faith, a willingness to be pushed and challenged in how we think through the faith issues of our day.

In other words, having OPEN MINDS has always been a priority here...

At the same time, Westminster has always been committed to Christ’s commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, both in Greenville AND throughout the world.

In other words, OPEN HEARTS has been an equal priority around here...

This congregation has a history of standing for justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Inman, “Growing in Faith: A History of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, 1947-2007,” published in 2007. Most of the history discussed in the next two pages is indebted to Sue’s marvelous book.

In 1963, the Session passed a resolution to seat a person of any race who came to the sanctuary to worship, during a time when not everyone agreed with such a stand.

This says something to us, regarding what happened in Buffalo yesterday: that because racism is still alive and well in our society, we do not have the option of remaining silent or inactive. We must speak out against such evil, and do what we are called to do to fight such evil.

Our congregation has a history of service to others, of hospitality and inclusion for everyone. That same decade, back in the 60s, starting Meals on Wheels in Greenville right here in our kitchen, or starting the Westminster Weekday School, or in the decades to come—taking mission trips to Malawi, to Haiti, to the Dominican Republic...

Or how about when Westminster Retirement Home was conceived and created through this church?

Or any number of other organizations that Westminster has helped, from Pleasant Valley Connection to United Ministries to Thornwell to Gateway House to Soteria...

If I were writing a letter like the letter to the Hebrews, I would say:

By faith, Westminster has had a deep sense of service and a mature sense of stewardship. By faith, our facility has been used for so many people through the years:

- from hosting 12 step groups that provide a lifeline for those struggling with addiction or mental illness,
- to hosting IHN, so that people who are without a home can have a safe place to spend the night.

And at the same time that we shared our facility, we've focused on growing our faith.

It's Elementary. November Nights. The Heritage Lecture series.

Whether it's a robust youth ministry that helps our teenagers grow in faith, or a vibrant children's ministry that provides the first foundations of faith, or a music ministry that touches every soul, or adult education classes that shape and change our souls, Westminster has time and time again said THIS IS WHAT the love of God known in Jesus Christ looks like.

This is our witness by faith.

Now I know...that's an incomplete list.

In fact, I suspect that as I was making that list, a few of you may have been making mental notes of the things that I overlooked or left out...

I hope you did that.

Because that's exactly the point.

The reason we look back in faith...is to remind ourselves that we all drink from wells we did not dig.

We all are indebted to those who came before us and how God worked through them, in more ways than one person can possibly name.

That is what we KNOW to be true about our faith.

Which leads to point number two.

The second thing to say about faith...

is that it's about what we do not know.

Let me get at it like this.

Who is the central figure of our two scripture passages today?

Abraham, good, good.

How old was Abraham (he was still Abram then) when God called him to leave his family and his kindred and his father's house, and go to the land that God would show him?

75 years old.

And how old is Westminster this year?

75 years old...gosh, y'all are a sharp group!

I wonder, at age 75, what Abraham was thinking when he heard God call him, saying that God would make a great nation out of him.

The Bible does not say what was going through Abraham's mind. It does tell us how he responded.

He responded in faith.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called...and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”

That's the second thing that faith is about.

NOT knowing.

If faith is first about what we do know—the ways God has worked through the saints of this church in the past—then second, faith is about what we do not know—meaning, the ways that God will work through Westminster in our future.

We know that God will be at work.

We just don't know what it will all look like yet.

And so faith means trusting the mind and imagination of God to lead you, even when you don't know where God will take you.

When was the last time you did that, in your own life of faith?

When was the last time you took a risk, following God's voice, not knowing where God would lead you, but trusting the imagination of God...to get you where you needed to go?

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At a preaching conference many years ago, I heard a story from an African-American preacher whom I had never heard before. He told about a time he was taking part in a gathering of theologians from around the globe, meeting to honor the legacy of the Martin Luther King, Jr.

The conference took place in Cuba.  
But the most interesting part of that week was not the conference.  
It was the relationship he formed with the translator that was assigned to him.

She was 24 years old,  
she was born after the blockade—  
and amazingly, she had never heard the story of Jesus.

She knew Marx, she Trotsky...but she did not Jesus.

So this pastor—as he got to know his translator that week—  
he shared with her, at every opportunity, the story of Jesus.

Before too long, she started bugging him for his manuscript.  
She wanted to be prepared when she had to translate his talk.  
And he said, “Ok...”—and he shared more of the story of Jesus.

Finally, the day before his talk, he handed her his manuscript. But he warned this translator that there might be some things he would say in the talk that WERE NOT a part of the manuscript.

She looked at him funny.  
Why would you do that?

Well, he replied, what I'm trying to do is serve the bread of  
heaven, and sometimes, God gives me that bread—  
RIGHT OUT OF THE OVEN!

She looked at him funny again.  
And he shared some more about the story of Jesus.

It came time for this preacher to speak at the conference, and he  
was making his final point of his talk. He was trying to explain that, for  
African-Americans, on April 4, 1968, when King was killed—it looked  
like the whole struggle for civil rights was over in this country.

But as he was making this point, all he was getting were more  
funny looks. BLANK STARES from his audience.

They could not understand the context in which he was  
speaking...he did not know what to do, when suddenly—  
some BREAD came out of the oven!

He turned to his translator and said, "Faust!"  
She looked down at her paper.  
Faust was not on the paper.  
So...she shrugged her shoulders, started to translate on the fly...

It was a reference to a painting, the story of Faust and the Devil, do  
you know this painting? Faust has sold his soul to the Devil. It shows  
Faust on one side of a chess board, and the Devil on the other side.

The Devil has Faust cornered.  
The title of the painting is "Checkmate."

The Devil is grinning and leering because there is no way out for Faust.

And the story goes as this painting was hanging in a museum gallery, being viewed by tourist after tourist, in one group of tourists, a man stopped and just stared at the painting.

His group moved on, but this guy just stood there, staring...

The tour group had moved to another room in the museum, when this man shouts out:

“It’s a LIE! It’s a LIE! The King has another move!”

To the average eye, it looked like checkmate.

But no one knew that this gentleman was an international chess champion. And to the master’s eye—he could see a move that the ordinary player could not see!

Now remember, the young translator has been translating all this to the audience.

“Well, the same thing happened on that terrible night in 1968. When King fell dead—it looked like checkmate! But just as it looked like it was ALL OVER—God yelled down from heaven:

“It’s a LIE! The King has another move!”

**And she translated that.**

“But it gets better than that,” he continued. “On one Friday afternoon, on a hill outside of Jerusalem called Calvary, when Jesus bowed his head and breathed his last—it looked like CHECKMATE.”

**And she translated that.**

“All Friday night—it looked like checkmate.”

“All Saturday night—it looked like checkmate.”

But early Sunday morning, booming down across the corridors of time, there came a cry from eternity saying, “It’s a LIE....it’s a LIE!”

“The King has another move!!”

**And she translated that.**

And this preacher went on to say that to people who think their life has no meaning, people who think it’s all over—God has a word for you:

**The King of kings and Lord of lords ALWAYS has another move!**

Well, at this point, the people in that Cuban audience no longer had blank stares. In fact, they were shouting and waving and pointing—not at the preacher, but at the young translator.

The preacher stopped talking, but she kept right on going!  
She wasn’t translating anymore.

The Spirit of God had just given her a new relationship with the living Christ. And she was witnessing, she was testifying, she was expressing her love for God in the power of God’s Spirit!

Faith had been born in her!

Neither the preacher nor the translator nor the crowd...could ever have imagined, when they woke up that morning, where God was going to take them.<sup>2</sup>

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And neither can we.  
But that's the good news of the gospel!  
But that's what the adventure of faith is about.

It's what our charter members knew, 75 years ago.

Back in 1947, when the charter members of this church started out, they did not know where God was going to take them, they did not know how God was going to lead them, they did not know what Westminster would become.

But they went forward without fear.  
And we can do the same.

So let me share with you how I hope our church will continue to be known.

Because that's the third thing faith is about.  
**Knowing, not knowing...and being known.**

It's about letting people see and experience God's love through you.

If we continue to be a church that welcomes everyone, no matter one's race or socioeconomic status, no matter one's sexual orientation or political persuasion...

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<sup>2</sup> As told by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright in a sermon preached at the Festival of Homiletics about 20 years ago.

And if we continue to be a church that strives not just to give money to the poor, but to get to know them, to build relationships with them, to walk alongside the suffering, the forgotten, and the voiceless in our community...

If we continue to work for justice both within and outside these walls, if we continue to joyfully take risks with our faith, approaching the future with open minds and open hearts...

If we always ask ourselves, when making a decision:

What's the most hospitable thing we can do?

What's the most generous thing we can do?

If we go forward with a faith that is NEVER paralyzed by fear, trusting that the King of kings and Lord of lords always has another move...

Then the love of Christ will continue to be known in this place.

Can you picture it, 75 years from now?

The love of Christ, known in this place?

It doesn't matter that you and I do not know who will be sitting in this sanctuary 75 years from now.

What matters is that they know the depth of God's love,  
and they are committed to sharing and showing that love  
with every neighbor, near and far, no exceptions.

So let this be a joyful day in the life of our church.

And then, when you wake up tomorrow, let your faith be known.

Through acts of service and sacrifice, acts of gratitude and grace, let your faith be known...

Amen.