

By Faith  
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.

We've all been told never to bite off more than we can chew.

I'm afraid that this text may be more than I can chew.

How do you try to break down *faith* into fewer than 20 minutes?

I spent this week checking in with some of Christianity's recent faith "experts":

mainly H. Richard Niebuhr, Marcus Borg and William Sloane Coffin.

And as theologians or ethicists – as writers hoping to sell their thoughts to the rest of us – they present themselves as very *sure* of what faith means.

I appreciate that – it's very reassuring in the face of such a large and fluid topic.

Take Borg, for example. He carefully lays out his understanding that throughout Christian history there have been four primary meanings of faith.

\*The first and most widely accepted today is faith as **belief**:

A "head" matter, he calls it;

"believing in spite of difficulties, believing even when you have reasons to think otherwise".<sup>i</sup>

\*Borg's second meaning for faith is faith as **trust**.

Not trust that God exists, but radical trust *in* God.

He uses the comparison of how, in teaching a child to swim, the greatest hurdle seems to be "getting the child to relax in the water...[convincing him] 'You'll float, it's okay'.

Faith as trust is trusting in the buoyancy of God.

Faith is trusting in the sea of being in which we live and move and have our being".<sup>ii</sup>

It's the Divine as rock or fortress or other biblical images of safety or caretaking.

\*Faith as **faithfulness** is the third understanding we've had in our history of the word.

Faithfulness is the honoring of the first commandment:

*you shall have no other gods before me.*

It is "loving God and loving your neighbor and being faithful, above all, to these two great relationships".<sup>iii</sup>

"Faith as [faithfulness] means loyalty, allegiance, the commitment of the self at its deepest level, the commitment of the 'heart'".<sup>iv</sup>

\*And finally, the one which actually prompted me to dive a little into the daunting depths of Niebuhr: faith as **vision**, as a way of seeing.

In his book *The Responsible Self*, H. Richard Niebuhr proposed that there are 3 ways we can see the whole, the universe, and therefore God. How we respond to God and the world depends on how we see God and the world.

x If the world is hostile and threatening – if we focus on the fact that pain and death will happen no matter what – then we respond to life defensively. It's dog eat dog; everyone for herself.

- x If the whole is perceived as indifferent – “the most common modern secular viewpoint; [that] the universe is made up of swirling force fields of matter and energy, but is neither hostile to nor supportive of our lives and dreams”<sup>v</sup> –  
then our response is likely to be precautionary; we try to build up security here and now.
- x If the All-in-All is viewed as life-giving, as nourishing, as having provided not only sustenance but wonder and beauty, then we can respond with radical trust.<sup>vi</sup>  
It is the second image of faith reflected back by this vision of the whole.

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These can be very helpful expressions of what we sometimes mean by the word faith:

belief: how we know what we know,  
trust: how we respond to life’s possibilities,  
faithfulness: how we act in relationship,  
vision: how we see the world around us.

But faith continues to be elusive because it is much more.

Faith is central to what it means to be a Christian, and yet many of us fumble in claiming faith in our own lives.

It remains so amorphous, so confusing, so seemingly inaccessible, and worst, perhaps: so *religious*.

Who has faith? Can one really *have* faith; own it? Can faith be lost? What are the parameters of *true* faith?  
And whose doctrine gets to decide? Can my faith be different from your faith?

And if so, what does that mean for me and you as Christians... and as “believers”?

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*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.*

So says the writer of the letter to the Hebrews.

But I don’t know that he had all that more of a definition to offer than we do.

The concept of faith remained so intangible that,  
rather than expound in bullet points,  
he created a litany,  
a memory,  
a song-like repetition of faith through the  
Hebrew people’s stories;

through their heroes;  
through the people who found meaning in the actions of their lives,  
and who passed it on.

This morning we read only one small part of that litany: the remembrance of Abraham.

Listen to the fuller telling of the story as this letter weaves it:

*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,  
the conviction of things unseen.*

*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.*

*By faith Abel offered to God a...sacrifice....*

*By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death....*

*By faith Noah, warned by God about events yet unseen, respected the warning.*

All of these names evoked images and stories known by heart.

The writer tells of Abraham, and then continues forward through yet more generations:

*By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future....*

*By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph....*

*By faith Joseph....*

*By faith Moses....*

*By faith the people....*

*By faith Rahab....*

*...what more should I say? [the writer ends triumphant with exhaustion]*

*For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets.*

By faith.

Each of the memories was given that same descriptor,

yet each of the persons was an individual,

his story distinct,

her faith unique.

What the author of the letter to the Hebrews knew about faith was that it is not the definition of the word – but in the actions of our lives that we can perceive what faith means.

In the story and the remembrance we get a glimpse

and can find inspiration to encourage our own faith.

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\*I met Helen in the retirement community where I served as Chaplain several years ago.

She loved living there for the aesthetic and intellectual and social stimulation:

classical concerts each Sunday,

dynamic lectures given by Yale faculty and

community day-trips to Boston and New York City.

But the financial fallout after September 11, 2001 greatly diminished the retirement funds Helen had invested; so she needed to find an alternative living arrangement.

I kept in touch with Helen through a local church, and found that within a year of moving into housing for low-income seniors, she had helped develop a city-wide program that, in addition to the basic housing support, provided much needed assistance to other seniors.

Would she have said that her actions were spurred by her faith?

I know she would.

Would she have compared herself to Abraham,

setting out for an unknown land with

fewer prospects than from where he'd come?

I doubt it.

But Helen's faith was that of *vision* –

despite her new circumstances, she saw the world as providing all that she needed, and she responded with radical trust.

She expressed concerns, to be sure, but throughout that time she also revealed a sense of wonder and beauty and hope.

I would add her to the litany: By faith Helen...

\*Last summer I attended a retreat with Don and Annalee.

Don was a retired minister who left his last congregation as the effects of Alzheimer's Disease started to make work difficult.

For the first 3-4 days on retreat together, Don and Annalee shared such good humor with the group that I barely recognized his cognitive losses.

Around mid-week the couple told their story about living with Alzheimers:

Don revealed his “tricks” – which most of us hadn’t picked up on.

He never called anyone by their names, because he couldn’t remember.

But he’d cover it by creating nick-names like

“good morning, early bird!” or “how’s your day going, guy?”

During their presentation, Don spoke of how important knowing names had been during his years of ministry, and how embarrassing it was for him not to know our names;

he told about his frustrations and challenges as he lost more and more of his independence;

and Annalee expressed her anger, her sadness and

her hope for a future cure for the disease.

Don and Annalee do this sharing with Alzheimer-affected families all over California, and he is one of the few who can speak publicly and from deeply personal experience.

Would they claim that their faith shapes their experiences of hope and fuels their efforts to help other families? I believe they would.

Their faith is in the framework of radical **trust** in God

through each of the challenges.

I add their names to the litany as well: By faith Don and Annalee...

\*For my own life and faith,

I give thanks that faith isn’t *always* about radical trust through the hard facets of existence.

In fact, one of my greatest joys is the expression of faith as revealed through relationship:

the descriptor Borg named **faithfulness**: Faithfulness to our love for God and one another.

I get a high when I have opportunity to work with couples before a wedding or commitment ceremony.

In preparing for the covenant they will make, there are moments when God’s love for us is made visible.

Our imperfect attempts at human love bring God ever closer to us.

Many couples don’t immediately connect their vows to an act of faith, but if you take Borg’s description of a deep “commitment of the ‘heart’”, then the relationship becomes clearer.

It is one act of **faithfulness**, and so I name them in the litany:

By faith couples...

\*When it comes to faith as belief, as a “head” matter, so to speak,

I turn to the wisdom of the late William Sloane Coffin. He writes:

“There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith,

for faith is not believing without proof but trusting without reservation.

[For] Faith is no substitute for thinking.

On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible.

It has what we might call a limbering effect on the mind;

by taking us beyond familiar ground,

faith ends up giving us that much more to think about.

Certainly Peter and Andrew and James and John,  
 in deciding to follow Jesus,  
 received more to think about than had they stayed at home.

And so it is with all of us:

if we give our lives to Christ,  
 if we leave familiar territory and take the leap of faith,  
 what we receive in return fills our minds altogether as much as it fills our hearts".<sup>vii</sup>

The litany continues: By faith our minds...

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How do you think Abraham would have described his own faith?

The faith heroes never get to speak for themselves,  
 only through the interpretations of the ones who remember and cherish them.

The same goes for Helen and Don and Annalee and all those premarital counseling couples.

They're not telling their stories the way I do.

Some of them have no clue how their faith has touched my life.

Neither will we tell our stories the same way that those who come after us will –  
 here at Plymouth or elsewhere in our lives.

So here's your chance:

By faith...

You get to fill in your own story. How will it go?

By faith you ...?

By faith you ...?

By faith you ...?

What is your faith calling you into?

By faith – may it be so.

Amen.

- <sup>i</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003) p. 30.
- <sup>ii</sup> Borg, p. 31.
- <sup>iii</sup> Borg, p. 33.
- <sup>iv</sup> Borg, p. 32.
- <sup>v</sup> Borg, p. 35.
- <sup>vi</sup> Borg, p. 35.
- <sup>vii</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) p. 8.