

## **Don't Be Afraid, Little Flock**

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we hear Jesus speak gently to His followers, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom," (Luke 12:32). These words are filled with comfort because of their tenderness, and also because of the promise He's given to us. Jesus assures us that we're not meant to anxiously scramble for security in this world. Instead, we're to live as people who trust in a coming kingdom – a better country.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus urges His disciples to be watchful, dressed for action, and ready for the Master to return. Why does He do that? It's because we no longer "fit in" here. Our treasure isn't here. Our hearts must be oriented toward Heaven. This idea is echoed in today's epistolary lesson, from Hebrews, where we encounter men and women who lived by faith, seeking a better homeland – a heavenly one. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Hebrews 11:1-16.

## **Read Hebrews 11:1-16.**

## **Faith is the Foundation**

Who the author of Hebrews may be is one of the Bible's biggest mysteries. Bible scholars don't know who wrote it, but they're certain that it wasn't Paul. Our passage this morning, though, opens with a very powerful statement:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible, (Heb. 11:1-3).

So often, we define faith as blind optimism. "I hope things will be better," sort of stuff. The opening words of our passage define faith as deep trust in God's promises. Faith is both substance and evidence – it gives us solid ground in an uncertain world.

This kind of faith is rooted in the character of God. It's the assurance that God, who has acted in history, will continue to act – even when we cannot see or understand how. It's the conviction that the invisible is more real than the visible. I want you to listen to something for a moment. **Play For King & Country, *Burn the Ships*, at:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOVrOuKVBuY>.

"Step into a new day, We can rise up from the dust and walk away, We can dance upon our heartache," For King & Country – they're a Christian band – sing. Faith sees beyond the immediate moment. Faith invites us to step forward – even when we don't yet see the road ahead of us. And to keep on keepin' on, despite what circumstances we find ourselves in.

## Heroes of the Faith

Next, we're given a list of what's been called the "hall of faith," heroes from the pages of the Old Testament.

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose Architect and Builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered Him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore, (Heb. 11:4-12).

We have a list of Bible heroes here – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah. They trusted God with their lives, often without understanding the full picture. Abel offered God a better sacrifice. Enoch walked with God so intimately that he did not see death. Noah built an ark based on God's warning of something never seen before. Abraham obeyed the call to go, not knowing where he was going. And Sarah believed in the God who gives life to the dead.

Now let's be clear here. They weren't perfect. Noah, after the flood ended and the ark settled on dry ground became drunk and cursed his grandson. And when Sarah heard God's promise to Abraham of a son, she laughed. And yet, their lives were marked by faithful obedience. They were willing to do what God told them to do. And they believed that God's promises were trustworthy, even when delayed.

Another For King & Country song – we've played it at Easter Sunrise service before – says, "Count to three and say a prayer, Down for love and up for air; Underwater, overjoyed; Water for a thirsty soul." It's a song about Baptism, and how Christ alone quenches our thirst. These Bible heroes of our faith were thirsty for something greater than this world could offer. And by faith, they began to live like citizens of Heaven.

## Strangers and Exiles on the Earth

Next we read:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return. (Heb. 11:13-15).

This is a great truth in Scripture. These heroes of the faith – we could probably even call them saints – they saw the promises from afar and embraced them. They lived as though God's promises were real because, by faith, they were. And they still are today!

It reminds me of another couple saints, from Luke's Gospel, Simeon and Anna. **Read Luke 2:25-38.** See, Simeon and Anna understood that they had to wait on God's promises, just like the Old Testament saints in this morning's list did. To confess that we're strangers and exiles on the earth rejects the illusion that this world is our final home.

It's not. As lovers and followers of Jesus Christ, we live right now, with a sort of holy homesickness. We live in gratitude for the beauty that surrounds us in this world – but we know something greater awaits us. Over the last five years, and nearly twenty celebrations of life that we've done here, I can't tell you how many times we've had the song "I Can Only Imagine," by MercyMe incorporated into those services.

That song's message resonates with us, as a local church. We know we'll see our loved ones again – but also because we know we'll be able to see Jesus face-to-face. Since we belong to Christ, we're drawn in our hearts, minds, and souls, to be with Him. Like Abraham, we seek the city whose Builder and Architect is God.

## A Better Country

"Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them," (Heb. 11:16). This verse shows us the heart of the faithful. We aren't content with the brokenness we see around us in this world. We yearn for God's kingdom. That yearning, or longing, is pleasing to God.

Faith is about expectation – like Simeon and Anna – they expected to see Jesus. And, they did! It's not about escaping the world's problems. It's the yearning for a world where "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore," as our Great Thanksgiving liturgy for Kingdomtide says.

Our whole being wants to live in a place where peace reigns, and where we are fully at home with God. Faith binds us together in hope – even while we currently live in a world where nations lift swords against other nations. Faith assures us that the city God is building is going to be worth waiting for. It's going to be beyond anything we can imagine!

### **Living Faithfully While We Wait**

While we long for that better country, we can't afford to sit idly by. Like the servants in Luke 12, we're called to "Be ready!" Faith doesn't retreat – it prepares. We live as people of hope. We forgive, love, serve, give, and worship – because our lives are shaped by what's coming!

Every act of faith is a declaration by us that this world is not all there is. We hold lightly to earthly treasures – "easy come, easy go," we might say – and cling tightly to the eternal Truth found in Scripture. We teach our kids and grand kids to live for Christ. We practice mercy, and walk humbly.

In the end, we must remember that our strength – everything we do – comes from God. And as we walk toward that better country, He's always with us. Hebrews 11 is more than a record of past saints. It's also an invitation for us to join them. It's a call to live by faith, to see the invisible, and to desire the better country.

We're not there yet, but we're on the way. And the road we walk is well-traveled by saints, sinners, servants, prophets, and pilgrims – who believed ahead of us, that God IS faithful. So let us live as people who are looking forward – instead of backward, as we so often do. We must live with our lamps lit, our loins girded, and with hearts ready for our Master's return, because the Kingdom is coming! The city is being prepared! And God is not ashamed to be called our God!

**Prayer:** Lord God, Thank You for the gift of faith – a faith that looks forward, that stands firm, and that walks in hope. Teach us to live as strangers in this world, but as children of Your kingdom. Strengthen us with courage for the journey, and fix our eyes on the city You have prepared. May our lives reflect Your promise, and may we never stop longing for the better country. In Jesus' name. Amen.