

**August 7, 2016
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
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“As Good as Dead”

Good morning! You may remember that last week we reflected on seeing and believing, and the importance of knowing not only with our minds, but also with our hearts. Believing in Jesus is always more than just assembling a convincing set of facts; it is the knowledge of the special relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son, having confidence in Jesus’ ability to heal, transform and save, and believing in the teachings of Jesus which we have received in the Bible and through the teaching of those who are inspired by the Bible.

Several of you mentioned to me following worship last week that faith is an important component of believing. I absolutely agree with you, and I’m glad you said something, and I hope you’re listening, because I had already planned to talk about faith this morning. The 11th Chapter of Hebrews is a natural place to go for a discussion about faith. Scholars aren’t sure who wrote the book of Hebrews -- sometimes it gets lumped together with other writings of Paul, but it’s stylistically quite different than Paul’s letters. Hebrews isn’t a letter at all, it’s more of sermon. The author calls it an “exhortation.” Whoever wrote it, it may have even been the deaconess Pricilla, he or she was writing to the second generation of Christians -- 50 or 60 years after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Some of these folks had experienced persecution or were discouraged that Christ had not yet returned. Some had fallen away from their faith or were leaving their Christian communities. The author was writing with encouragement, exhortation, and the conviction that through Christ, Christians have direct access to God.

I wish I had written this as the beginning of a sermon, but since the author of Hebrews beat me to it, listen to these opening words:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed to be heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3a)

That is great stuff. It sets the stage for the rest of the book of Hebrews: chapter 11 is sometimes called the "Hall of Faith," and gives a history of faithful believers; chapter 12 gives the example of Jesus, and chapter 13 tells us how we can live lives that are pleasing to God. It's a great progression. I want to focus on Chapter 11 and some thoughts about faith. Specifically, what does faith look like for grown-ups, and what does it demand from us? I'm indebted to Bruce Maples for some of these ideas.

Hebrews 11 opens with these words, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith means being able to "see" beyond the things which are literally in front of us. Faith is the capacity to believe in things which we have not yet seen; even things which might look impossible. Hebrews 11 gives the example of Abraham, who obeyed God's call and set out even when he didn't know where he was going. Verse 11 talks about Abraham receiving the power of procreation, which is a pretty diplomatic way to talk about guy who is 99 years old getting his 90 year old wife pregnant. Even the author of Hebrews acknowledges this is pretty far-fetched.; verse 12 says, therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born.

That is quite a phrase, "as good as dead." I wonder how Abraham would have felt about being described that way. If you're as good as dead, you have no hope; you have no future. How can you have faith if you're as good as dead?

I'd like to tell you about someone else who was as good as dead. I'm sure he wouldn't have described himself that way, which is why his story is significant. If he had accepted the idea that he was as good

as dead, he probably would have died as others in his situation did. Instead, he survived to be a motivational speaker, had a business principle named after him, and became a vice-presidential candidate. His name is Admiral James Stockdale, and he was the highest ranking naval officer to be held as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. He was imprisoned for over 7 years. Because of his rank, he was subjected to more brutal treatment than other POWs: he was kept in isolation, in a lighted room 24 hours a day, and he was shackled even when he slept. Somehow Stockdale lived through this experience, even when younger and seemingly more fit prisoners did not survive. How did Stockdale do it?

His answer is known as the Stockdale Paradox; his principles have been used by businesses and in Ross Perot's 1992 political campaign. I think they have something to say to us about faith, even from a man who was as good as dead. Here's what Stockdale says: the prisoners who were complete optimists or complete pessimists were the ones which had the most trouble surviving. The key to Stockdale's survival was the combination of optimism and realism. He held on to the conviction that he would prevail in the end, no matter how difficult things were right now. But at the same time, he had to confront the brutal facts of his current reality, whatever they were.

That, my friends, is a description of faith: optimism and realism. Let me say a bit more about that: we as Christians hold on to the conviction that God will prevail: if we have victory, it is through the power of God through Jesus Christ. It is not *our* power which will prevail -- we may be as good as dead -- but we can do all things through the power of God, and through Christ who strengthens us. But the other part of that is that we actually have to *do* things. We are challenged to do more than just sit on our hands and wait for God to come rescue us. If we think that's the solution, we are as good as dead. Elderly Abraham and barren Sarah may have been skeptical about God's covenant to make a great nation of their descendants, but when God got around to making good on that promise, I'm pretty sure Sarah and Abraham had to participate in the process in order for them to have descendants.

We should not read Hebrews 11 -- which lists a whole lot of folks -- as merely a roll call of the giants of our faith who did really great stuff. We should be asking what these stories of faith have in common with our own stories. These were not perfect people. Good heavens. They didn't have easy lives -- far from it. Old Abraham, he was no superman -- he was as good as dead. And yet he dared to listen to God, and have faith in a promise that he couldn't see.

Optimism is a quality which we cultivate in community. One of the most difficult things for POWs to endure -- perhaps more difficult than physical abuse -- is isolation. If we think we're alone, optimism withers and hope dies; when we know that other people are experiencing the same things we are going through, it can give us hope even in the midst of suffering. Admiral Stockdale was kept in isolation for long periods of time. If he had been alone, he would have been as good as dead. But he developed a method of communication, a tap code of 5 letters in five rows, which allowed him to send and receive communication with other prisoners. It was a life-line which kept his hope alive. We will not prevail because we have optimism: we will prevail because God is on our side, but optimism is a gift which we can give each other on the journey.

Stockdale woke up each morning with three thoughts:

I'm still in this horrible place.

Someday, though, I'm going to get out.

If that's so, what should I do and how should I act today?

I think there is some great material here for people of faith: we are here in this place -- our workplace, our families, our health, our church-- this is our current reality. We might be so discouraged that we think we're as good as dead. But whatever our situation, we have faith that God is calling us to something more, something deeper, something we believe in but cannot yet see. If that's so, what should we do and how should we act today? We don't have to be perfect, we don't have to be superhuman, but we have to work with the conviction that together we can move our current reality closer to God's reality: there is a God, and that God is loving and good, and loving people loving God is who we are called to be. This is the power of God and the power to do all things through Christ who strengthens us. It isn't a

trick, it isn't an illusion, it isn't a magic bullet which will protect us from pain or adversity, it is faith: the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. This is the faith we are called to walk in today and every day, and the faith which will bring us home. Amen.