



Landscape with Stars, ca. 1905-1908, Cross, Henri Edmond, 1856-1910; Metropolitan Museum of Art

August 7, 2022

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Faith: Virtual and in Person!

Prayer:

Charles Mayo, one of the Doctors who founded the Mayo clinic said: "Worry affects the circulation, the heart, the glands, the whole nervous system, and profoundly affects the health. You have never known... (someone) who died from overwork, but many who died from doubt."

We are living in an anxious time. Previous generations used the term "worry" for what we often call anxiety now. Giving attention to doubts, worries, anxieties is what our minds are made to do, weighing them ... but I'd like to encourage you this morning to interrogate the

language of your inner life. While it is important to stay alert to real dangers, what role does faith play?

A few years ago I wrote an opinion piece for the Hartford Courant, the editor used the title: "You Can't *Believe* in Science." (They use headlines to catch your attention.) My main point was that often and easily we use the language of belief/faith about things that are facts; which does not help us think clearly either; about either science or faith. For example, you might hear someone say they don't "believe in climate change" or they "believe evolution." It's a mix of the language of faith and science together in one sentence. Science is a collection of established facts, it has nothing to do with belief. It's the opposite of belief, in fact, its data. You build scientific principles on data. Faith on the other hand, would not be faith at all, if it could be proved. Listen to Hebrews one more time: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." This is not scientific method. Scripture has another project for us.

One of the sad byproducts of this conflation of our language and thinking is that we've made it very hard for people of faith to feel comfortable in scientific fields; and people of science to feel comfortable in church. A scientist will have a lot of trouble with their integrity if they try to be a person of *faith and science* – especially if they use the language of faith relating to their work – "I believe in this cancer treatment," "I believe you should have surgery." Those recommendations are based on statistical data; not faith. The other problem with not using careful language is that we can undermine our own faith. This hits closer to home. Do you need proof of what you have faith in? If you do, it isn't faith you have. Just doubts, worry, anxiety...

Hebrews 11:1 says: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Do you believe that? I'm curious about what people mean when they say they have faith. We talk about having faith in God, and we also talk about having faith in each other. "The assurance of things hoped for...the conviction of things not seen."

Words are the building blocks that we use to construct our worlds, our identities, and our problems, doubts, and anxieties. Even in Genesis, God creates the world by a word, "God said, let there be light, in the prologue to the gospel of John, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God..." We are also constructing what we *believe* by the words we use.

If someone says they don't believe in you. It's a vote of no confidence. If they believe in you, that means what? They see you, they have confidence in you, even beyond what you have already demonstrated by your life in the world. (I see Mary's belief in her son when she tells the servants at the Wedding of Cana to do whatever Jesus tells them... *before* he turns the water into wine. Since it was before, she has faith in him.)

At a previous church I served, this was before the pandemic, we had a Livestream option for worship. When I arrived it had been in place only about a year and it didn't work more often than it did. The money for it had been given as a directed gift for the whole system which at that time was really expensive, by a member who was homebound and this allowed

her, and she reasoned, others like her to watch online. I'm not sure if it was because it didn't work very well, or because people didn't see her. But a lot of our people just didn't believe in it. They didn't believe anyone was joining us online, they didn't think their experience was legitimate worship, they didn't believe in their membership if they didn't see them in the building.

I did not have faith in these people – instead I had proof of them. Many were active givers, and I visited them and had detailed, spirited discussions with them about the content of my sermons which they saw online. What's more, many of our homebound members were in contact with and actively supporting one another emotionally – generally by phone. They discussed the worship and music with each other. More than once a family member was directed to bring a laptop to the hospital room of a member so that they could watch our worship service from the hospital. Because it's healing. It reminds us of who we are. And you can see friends and familiar faces when you are alone with your disease, and the Doctors are serving up facts, and what's needed, in addition to the treatment, is faith.

The day I was undone was the hot summer day I arrived at the hospital to visit someone I had been seeing regularly there. There were three people in the room when I arrived, her husband, her son, I could see the open laptop on the hospital tray and she lay still in the bed, having taken her last breath after they had watched the virtual service together, before I had time to finish up and get in my car and drive to the hospital. Her final benediction was given online, by my colleague, her Pastor whom she knew in person. It was a beautiful gift at the end of her suffering, the depth of their gratitude was matched only by their faith.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. How ironic that in that moment, the people online had faith, the people in person didn't believe in them. I'm in a position to report that data.

Hebrews outlines the life of Abraham as a life of faith, having lived most of his long life believing in God's promise to him, that had yet to take shape and form in reality. Late in his life his sons were born, the land he was promised he camped on for a time being, we have the benefit of looking back at the data, and we can see that between what are called the "Abrahamic religions" Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Abrahams descendants are "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." In point of fact, they are. And like the stars and the grains of sand, they continue to grow in number in ways none of us can know or predict.

Last week we welcomed new members into our church. The church covenant which we read together ends with these words:

"As a community of faith, we affirm the worth and dignity of all people. We acknowledge our continuing need for God's grace and our dependence upon one another in the fulfillment of this covenant."

These are beautiful words, we aren't waiting for the church to finally prove itself to us, rather we see it already. We know it already. We live into it already. We do this ourselves, and we walk in faith, in confidence that others will also walk in faith with us. Because they have already, because they are now, because they will. Abraham is an example of this (if you believe in his historicity), those online join us in this (whether or not we believe in them), some in the future may watch this later on and be part of this. For now, it's not a matter of facts, it's a matter of faith... virtual and in person, historical and in the future, in one heart, and in another heart also. Believe in God, believe also in each other.

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