

August 7, 2022
Sermon by Rev Judy Steers

A reading from Paul's Letter to the Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 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 Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old and Sarah herself was barren because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

As many of you know, a couple of weeks ago I returned from a family trip to the Czech Republic. One of the places we went, indeed, where almost every tourist to the Czech Republic goes, is the Charles Bridge in Prague. Walking on the bridge itself was not an epic experience, at least it wasn't for me – it was hot and crowded and lined with overpriced tourist traps and sketch artists. It was later on that I discovered how epic the Charles Bridge was, when I heard its story.

In the museum beside the bridge there is a large room with an enormous scale model of the bridge being built. I am a sucker for historical models and this one was done in painstaking detail – every plank, rock, rope and person, all in miniature, showing the extraordinary process of thousands of people building a 10 metre wide, 500 metre long stone bridge by hand.



Prague was a significant city in the Holy Roman Empire. Construction of the bridge started in 1357, to replace an older stone bridge that had been washed away 15 years earlier in a spring flood. The bridge was commissioned by Charles the IV, the

Holy Roman Emperor. Charles himself died in 1378, and the bridge was completed 45 years after it started, in 1402. Somewhat amazingly, it was the only bridge across this wide river until 1841, so for almost 450 years it connected and formed the trade route between west and east parts of the city.

What was remarkable to me about this story was the commitment to a vision that one would not see completed. Those who began working on the bridge were certainly not the ones who finished it. There was an act of faith in that work – every day. Stone by stone, even if you knew you would never see the end result, you did your part.

We don't have anything human-made that is that old anywhere on this side of the ocean, but perhaps another story closer to home also illustrates this. Last spring at school, the outdoor ed teacher and I led the grade 5 and 6 students in making maple syrup. We tapped the trees in February, gathered and stored sap in March, and boiled it down and by April made about 10 litres of syrup. Not bad for a first year. While we were in the planning stages, asking the students what they might like to work on to support this project, an interesting conversation happened.

One student said "We could have a fundraiser, and buy more maple trees, and plant them". "What's the point of that?" said another student. "They won't be old enough to tap for years and years". "That is true", we as teachers said. "You won't ever harvest sap from those trees. But your children might." They were a little taken aback by that concept. I asked them to think about our 90 year old trees on the rise above the school playgrounds. What if someone said that before they planted those trees that we tap? 'There's no point planting them – we won't see the results'. Those 90 year old trees were planted by someone with a great vision – someone who could imagine a shady lane for horses, shelter for innumerable birds, animals living in the branches, and beautiful sap flowing prodigiously every spring. Faith is what we plant trees with. (one student even asked – with awe in his voice "Are those trees older than Canon Hulse!??")

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen..."

Abraham, led by God, left his homeland and family and set out on a journey towards an unknown future. Abraham was called to be the father of many nations. When he set out, he was old and childless. There was not much to hang a vision on.

What the reading from Hebrews reminds us is that Abraham held onto that vision – a nation, a city, a people who number more than the grains of sand in the desert and stars in the sky – even though he never would even come close to seeing that vision become real. He had one son, by Hagar, his young servant and then another son, by his elderly wife, Sarah. Hardly a nation. Isaac grew up an only child. They lived in tents as nomadic people, for the rest of their lives. As a single mother, Hagar raised her son Ishmael far away.

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them

I find that a beautiful and captivating phrase – “From a distance, they saw and greeted them”. That is faith. Their lives were shaped by a vision they would not see, like Moses who never entered the promised land but faithfully guided God’s people there for the whole latter part of his life. But, if they hadn’t done what they do, then the vision could never have been realized.

Sometimes you get to see a tiny piece of a bigger vision. I am very aware that it is the faithfulness of Robert Hulse, who has been the chaplain at St John’s Kilmarnock school, on a very part time basis, for 50 years, that has led to there now being a full time chaplain at the school. I am humbled and grateful that I get to fill that role, but I know I would not be there if not for Robert’s faithfulness to the small tasks, to the deliberate steps, to just being present and holding a vision.

It’s important to keep the big picture in mind. The legend goes of a traveller who visits the city of Chartres, and finds a great cathedral being built there, or rather, re-built there, as over the early centuries it had been built and destroyed many times. The traveller asks the people on site what they do. The first one says “I am a stone mason; I cut the stones to fit into the walls”. Another says “I am a carpenter. I build the frames for the masonry”. He finally asks a woman, sweeping up sawdust and stone chips what she is doing. “Me?” she replies “I’m building a cathedral to the glory of God”.

I have heard it said that one of the ways to better understand a word is to know its opposite. For example, the opposite of love isn’t hate, it is *apathy*. The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is *certainty*. Faith is what keeps us moving, placing another stone, planting a tree, following Jesus’ way of forgiveness and compassion despite the darkness of the world. Faith is the vision for things unseen that we are only partly aware of. But thanks be to God for the gift of faith that reminds us of who we are, and whose we are as we take our small part day by day. For you are a part of that great family of Abraham, whose descendents number more than the stars in the sky, and the grains of sand in the desert.

