

*The Assurance of Things Hoped For*

This morning, as we prepare to celebrate the sacrament of baptism, I'd like to give you a working definition of a *sacrament*. A sacrament is *a visible sign of an invisible grace*.

I suppose we need a working definition of grace, while we're at it: *Grace is the unmerited, unearned, unconditional love of God*.

The Lord's table, the baptismal font – I know we confine them to the service of worship... but the promises they signal – they aren't confined to the table and the font, are they?

I sure hope not.

My late friend Betty McLaney tells the story of the time she was asked to speak at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church about the importance of including children at the table in the Lord's Supper. She said, "They didn't ask me until the last minute, because they knew I'd say no otherwise. But since I was an educator, they figured if they told me at the last minute that nobody else would, I'd have to say something on behalf of the children. And they were right. So, I stood up to the microphone in front of a thousand ministers and I said, "I understand that some of us are worried children won't understand the mystery of faith if they come to the table. Do you understand the mysteries of faith? Who better than a child to comprehend the wonder and mystery of God?"

In another congregation I served, I walked alongside a family through the grieving process for a young man who had died. We mourned, and we cried, and we gathered to remember the promises of his baptism.

Many months later, I said a benediction after a communion service. I never plan my benedictions ahead of time – to be sure, I always use the scriptural version of the Aaronic benediction - but the *rest* is unplanned until after I finish preaching. I make a lot of plans for worship, but it's good to leave a little room for the Holy Spirit, don't you think?

So, during the final hymn I was trying to think of what to say, and this is what I came up with, "Go as God's beloved who have been fed at the Lord's table, and go as God's beloved who know that you will return to the table, in this life, or the life to come."

I hadn't considered all those words might mean until his grandmother approached me one day to tell me what it meant to her, to think of the table as the place of joyful reunion.

I've used that benediction after communion ever since.

Promises, promises... they are the cornerstone of our faith, aren't they?

The Hebrew Scriptures are full of the promises of God... they're called *covenants* instead, but in the end, they're really just promises.

The New Testament – it's all about promises too, isn't it?

Sunday after Sunday we declare that we believe in the communion of the saints, and on those days when we come to the table, that is the claim that we make when we join our voices with the choirs of angels and archangels who forever sing holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts. We come to the communion table and claim that we are in continuity with, and in communion with all the saints of every time and place... it's a promise.

Likewise, with some regularity, we gather around this font, as we will shortly, and we remember that God has pledged to be with us always, even to the end of the age... that's a promise.

The letter to the Hebrews tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen. It is a statement of gospel that is more than the mere words that outline its content just as the communion of the saints is more than the mere elements of store-bought bread and Welch's grape juice, and baptism is more than splashing a little (or in my case, a lot) of water on a child's head.

The preacher of the letter to the Hebrews culminates one portion of admonitions with these words before turning to the activity of giving examples, and to be sure, this gospel claim does not make exhaustive descriptions of the nature of faith, it captures only a shadow, only a whiff of the heavenly kingdom we are promised.

But then, isn't that all we ever perceive, a shadow, a whisper of the reality that God proposes and promises to us, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen?

Writing on this passage, Dr. Thomas Long muses, "The preacher knows the difference between what is real and what can be seen. What is *real* is that Christ is Lord. The heir of all things through whom the world was created now reigns in majesty. But this central reality is hidden from view. As the preacher said earlier in the sermon, 'We do not yet see' the glory of Christ as Lord of all. What the naked eye can see, of course, is a world of suffering and setback, violence and hardship. Given the harsh realities of the world, faith is the ability to see with the *inner eye*, to see what cannot be seen with the *natural eye*. In Saint Exupery's classic story, *The Little Prince*, a mysterious fox promises to tell a little boy the greatest of life's secrets. When at long last the secret is told, it is this: 'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.'"<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> Long, Thomas G. *Hebrews*, in *Interpretation*. P114 *italics mine*.

In the preacher's rendering of the faith story of Israel we encounter in the letter to the Hebrews, the very next words are a recounting of the faith stories of the saints who have preceded the preacher, beginning with Abraham and moving forward, a veritable who's who of the Bible, a listing of those whose actions were imputed as righteousness by God who loved them and called them into being as God's people.

To be reminded of the faith stories of the people of God is to be reminded of the *promises* of God. Our lection this morning from Hebrews reminds us that the God who asks for faithfulness *from* us is the God who is endlessly faithful *to* us. The truth is, the Bible is a bit short on details when it comes to what happens to us when we die. Of all those saints in *Hebrews*, the Bible doesn't tell us much about their fate. Through the years, folks have come up with some pretty far-fetched ideas from stories in the Bible, stories with one foot in fantasy, at times. But there are also some *other* words that tell us a little, a hint of God's plans for us: When we read from the words of the Gospel and the Epistles, for instance, that we will be made whole. We can conclude that we are God's beloved, that we will know one another, and in Paul's words, "That we will not all die, but be transformed, in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye." That's all true. But, the particulars - the nuts and bolts - that is not given to us. The Bible is more concerned with life than death, and God wants us to be as well.

A number of years ago, I was approached by a woman I know well with a concern that her father had. Her father was concerned that his wife, whom he loved dearly and mourned daily would be caught in one of two alternate possibilities in death: Either that she would be forced to worry over the travails of her husband, children and grandchildren, consumed by their grief for her, or that she would be so consumed by the supposed pleasures of heaven that she would quickly forget her family. Both prospects seemed to him more than he could bear. His daughter wanted to know if there was some scripture that she could share with her father to ease his fears.

Well, no scripture jumped to my mind to address that. All that came to me to say was, "You tell him that I don't know the answer for sure, but that is less than I would expect from God."

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

The farthest limits of our imagination cannot contain the living God. It's possible God may be *different* from the farthest reaches of our minds and imaginations, but not *less*.

Jesus reveals to us the fullness of God – there's not an alternate version of God in hiding - but we do not know exhaustively all there is to know about God. God is *more* than our human imagination can fathom, to be sure, but not less. Never less.

The deep promises, the mysteries of God in which grace is given to us... why would we ever try to limit them? To limit to the confines of our imagination the grace of God is to impoverish our own spiritual paths. These are deep, deep mysteries. These are deep, deep promises.

When I was a child, perhaps the same is true for many of you, children weren't invited to the communion table. For a long time, the Presbyterian church thought that the one sacrament was for children, but the other wasn't. We would baptize babies whether they had a clue what we were doing, but then we'd fence them off from the table until they were old enough to *understand* it. But my parents must have had a rebellious streak, because they would break off a crumb of the cut-up bread they took from the silver tray.

I wonder how many of you had the same experience in the churches of your childhood?

I have never forgotten a story told by Catherine Gonzalez, of a young woman who had become the sole caregiver for her aging father who suffered from Alzheimer's Disease. One of the few memories that lingered was that of communion, and so her priest would come regularly. But finally, even that memory faded. The priest asked if she would like him to continue to come. "Yes," she said. "When I was a little girl, too young to understand what was going on, my father would take bread at communion, and give me a piece with the words, 'You do not understand this now, but someday you will, and your place is at this table.'"

When the time came for the passing of the elements, the young woman said to her father, "You do not understand this now, but someday you will, and your place is at this table."

The same is true of this font. Tobias, you don't understand this now, but someday you will, and always – always – your place is here, in the body of the faithful. You are a part of this communion of the saints.

Really, these are the holy mysteries of God. I can't really explain them, other than to quote Calvin and call it the church Invisible, and know that somehow, God will never be less than we expect, and that somehow, every time we come to this table Christ is present with us and with all the saints of every time and place as we sing, *holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts*. And every time we come to this font and sing, *the Lord bless you and keep you*, we remember that Christ will be with always, even to the end of the age, because we know that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.