

“God of “Grace”” Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore, from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, 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, for he has prepared for them a city.

Now, let us begin with some reflections. What do you think, dear brothers and sisters, is this a good time for Christians, for the Gospel? Do things look good for the Church? Is this a promising and hopeful season?

What do we see around? What do we see in our society? What attitudes? What trends? What do we see in the Church? Are congregations growing? Or are they just growing older? What about new people, who are being rescued from the slavery to sin and death and brought to Christ? Do we have many of them?

It seems that the whole Christian thing has lost its attraction and is being deliberately pushed out of our society. Many things that Christians hold dear are seen as backward and wrong, and Christians who still stand for them are being silenced. It seems that many are turning away from Christ and His Church exactly because she has become such an object of critique and contempt.

Besides, often situation is not much better inside Christian communities. So many are torn apart by different arguments, where some want to do whatever it takes to please the world, while others want to remain faithful and please God.

So, what do you think, is this a good time for Christians? When we look at things visible, when we look at the world around us, it is not that easy to find a reason for optimism. What would we need in this situation?

I think what we need is to read the chapter 11 from the letter to Hebrews. This is the most famous faith chapter in the whole Bible. And it speaks into situations just like ours. And it speaks about people just like us. God's people. Chosen and beloved.

Let us see how we can find encouragement in what the author of this letter writes. I would say that the author offers to us encouragement at least in two ways – by giving us hope and by showing us grace. Let's see how it works.

Hope first. The author lists names which are well known to us. Our brothers and sisters in faith, our fellow-saints, our fellow-children of God, whose lives with all their struggles and challenges are recorded for us in the Bible.

And what a list it is! Abel. What a great encouragement to think about Abel. He got killed by his jealous brother. Enoch. Okay, we don't know much about him, except that He had pleased God. Noah. Great... how can we be encouraged by Noah?

He spent hundred years building the ark, preaching about the holy God, calling people to repentance, warning about the coming judgment, probably being ridiculed and rejected as crazy, and then... to live through this catastrophic event, the Flood.

Abraham. We know quite a bit about his life story. "Leave your family and your county and go where I will tell you." Live in strange lands as a stranger. Be in danger from powerful people. Keep waiting for decades and decades until what you hope for will happen. Good times...

Moses. One more of the names on the list. Spent third of his life in exile, and another third wandering in the desert with the bunch of people who just wouldn't stop rebelling and complaining, and running after other gods.

Besides, he got the "privilege" to be involved with this lengthy and highly stressful exchange with the Pharaoh of Egypt. Then there are other God's people mentioned as well. Not by names, but by their life stories. It is edifying a reading. Just listen.

"Some were tortured ... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth."

Why are their lives recorded in the Bible and how would this give us encouragement, or hope? Their lives are recorded because of their faith. They trusted their God, and so they all can serve us as examples of what faith is and what it gives.

Okay, what is this faith that they all had? There are so many misunderstandings about what Christian faith is. Some think it is just a vague believing that there is some sort of god somewhere. And then people may say that they have their faith too.

Some think that it is just a form of ignorance. When you don't know or don't understand something then you mask your ignorance by saying that that is a god who did it. All these false ideas are light years away from what Christian faith is.

But as the author of Hebrews put it: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The assurance of things hoped for... The conviction of things not seen.... What does this mean?

That this faith can be described as firm and clear hope, the assurance of what is to come, of what we are waiting for. Our hope. And Christian hope is not some method of positive thinking, where we just try to cheer ourselves up.

This hope is not some naïve and misplaced optimism, that leads into passivity and idleness. "O, we just hope that everything will be okay. It is bad, but we hope it will be good, somehow, someday..." No, Christian hope is powerful and active thing.

It is about being sure and certain about where we are heading. It is about making our future to come the source of our energy, and strength and joy already today. When looking forward to what we know is prepared for us, what awaits God's beloved, we are transformed and empowered.

And above all it is about our trust in the person who has given us these promises. Trust in God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. But did these heroes of faith receive what they were hoping for? The author of Hebrews answers to this question:

"These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." They died not having received...

Sure, some of their hopes were fulfilled. After 100 years of waiting, Noah and his family were saved through the Flood. In the old age Abraham had his promised son Isaak born. But he didn't see his descendants becoming numerous like stars in heaven. Neither did Isaak or Jacob.

Moses got to see the promised land, but never entered it. David saw his son Solomon sitting on his throne, but he didn't see the One who will sit on his throne forever. Isaiah saw in his vision the new greater exodus, where the Suffering Servant would free His people from sin and death, but didn't live to witness it with his own eyes.

And so on... Nevertheless, all these our fellow saints lived firmly trusting their God, who had given them these promises and looking forward to even more distant future where they will finally reach their eternal home, prepared and promised to them by

their faithful God. And it was this faith, this trust, this hope that helped them to follow their God, to obey Him, to leave their comfort zones, to face dangers, to rely on God even when things visible told them that nothing good was coming.

Or as the author of Hebrews puts it, having this hope our brothers and sisters “conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight...” and so on.

We can see that this faith, this trust, this hope is not a joke, it a mighty and powerful thing. We are so blessed to have the Bible. The Bible not only tells us about these fellow-saints, but also shows how in His time God fulfilled all the promises that He had given His people. That everything He foretold, He also accomplished.

What an encouragement it is for us! We know that our God, our Father in heaven is faithful God, and He is all powerful God, He remembers His promises and He delivers without failing. No one and nothing can hinder Him. He will make it happen.

Now, what do we hope for? We hope in the New Heavens and the New Earth, where we will dwell together with our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, and where our lowly, sin and sickness ridden bodies will be transformed to be glorious like His.

Where we will be like the risen Son of God. Where we will enjoy blessedness and joys that can't be even expressed in human words, which can be described by saying that the struggles and sufferings of present age are not worth even comparing with the glory that is to be revealed. (Rom 8).

“The throne of God and of the Lamb will be ... [among us and we] ... will worship him. [We] ... will see his face, and his name will be on ... [our] foreheads. [We] ... will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be [our]... light, and [we] ... will reign forever and ever.” (Rev 22).

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, [this is] what God has prepared for those who love him”. This is our hope. This is our faith. This is what we are certain about and what empowers us today.

So, this in one way we are encouraged by these people, seeing how their hope has helped them in situation which often were so much more hopeless and dangerous than our own. Their faith, their hope didn't let them down, but always helped them to see it through.

But there is something else really encouraging about the names listed in this chapter 11. And this something gives us the second kind of encouragement. Do you know what it is? It is about God's grace. We may take a superficial look at those names and think – wow, all these holy people of faith! I am not like them. I can't be like

them. Wrong! They were just like us. How? For they were imperfect sinners who often failed terribly. We could use this chapter listing the sins of these our brothers and sisters, – drunkards, murderers, pimps, tricksters, prostitutes, cowards, liars, adulterers, idolaters, and so on.

So why are their lives recorded in the Bible? To show that Christian faith is about God's undeserved grace, and not about our heroic actions. From beginning till the end, the Bible is about this gracious God. Abundantly, prodigally gracious God.

He comes to us, sinful and weak, He speaks to us, He gives us our hope, He sends His Spirit in our hearts, He creates our faith, and He Himself leads, holds and protects us throughout our lives. Throughout all our challenges.

That is always Him. Always with us. Always with you. To encourage. To comfort. To give us hope that fills us with warmth and peace even when the visible things don't appear too good for us. Our Father and our Lord Jesus, and their Spirit in us. That is how the author of Hebrews encourages us.

One last note. But very important one. We know that our God gives us His name. He puts His name on us in our Baptism. We are called Christians. But there is something else beautiful. As the author of Hebrews wrote it: "God is not ashamed to be called their God."

Your God is not ashamed of you. He is not ashamed of being called your God. He wasn't not ashamed to be called God of Abraham, or Isaac, or David, or Paul. And He is not ashamed to be called God of "Grace" Lutheran church. Your God. He knows you, and He is not ashamed of us, and that should be enough for us.

These may not be the best times for the Church, but we still have the best faith, the best hope and the best God the Father and the Son and The Holy Spirit. Therefore, let's rejoice and be glad, and let's proclaim His excellencies to the world that so desperately need this hope and this grace.

Amen.