

Where's the Magic?

Hebrews 11:1-12

Billy Bob, a good old boy from the Deep South, stopped at a convenience store. There he ran into Ricardo, an old buddy from New York City. Billy Bob was a mischievous sort. When no one was looking he stole 3 candy bars from a store shelf.

Walking out of the store he turned to Ricardo and bragged, "Ha! Did you see what this old Southern boy did? I stole three candy bars and got away with it. Man, I'm slick."

Ricardo wasn't impressed. "That's nothing. Let's go back to that store and I'll show you what slick is where I come from."

So they returned to the convenience store. Ricardo went up to the young man behind the counter and said, "You want you see a fantastic magic trick?"

The young man said, "Well, I guess so."

Ricardo said, "Give me a candy bar."

The convenience store clerk gave him a candy bar, and Ricardo ate it. He asked for a second candy bar, and he ate that as well. He asked for the third candy bar and finished that one too. "That's it," he said. "That's the trick."

The young man behind the counter was grossly disappointed. He asked, "But where's the magic?" Ricardo replied: "Check in my friend's pocket. You will find all three of the candy bars there."

Have you to church and thought, "Where's the magic?" I don't mean that you're expecting a magic show with a magician and rabbits and such. You may wish that was going to happen this morning, but it's not. I have no desire to make a spectacle out of worship, which I think happens far too often in too many places.

But I do think that there ought to be a sense of expectancy when you come into this space - that something special is going to happen – as if you expect this day to be in the presence of God.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews has that kind of magic. The writer is trying to define the meaning of faith and it's clear that he believes there's magic in faith. Listen to how he begins with a definition: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see . . ." Hebrews 11:1

That's nice, but kind of abstract. What does he mean by that—"faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see . . ."?

Fortunately the author doesn't stop there. He shows us faith in action. "This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."

That's a little heavy, too. "What is seen was not made out of what was visible." But the writer's just getting warmed up. He's taking us back to that time when God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Then, turning to the first chapters of the Bible, he begins with Abel and shows how Abel's offering to God was more acceptable than Cain's because of his faith. Then he deals with Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and even the harlot Rahab, and he shows us the importance of faith at work in their lives.

Later he'll add to these the names of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets who through faith "conquered kingdoms, administered justice .

. . shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies . . .” (33-34)

It’s a stirring chapter filled with magic that only God could perform. We see that same magic in our brief lesson for today and I want to focus on that 99-year-old patriarch named Abraham who learns that his 98-year-old wife Sarah is pregnant.

If a 99-year-old woman, way past childbearing years, will bear a child whose 100-year-old father is “as good as dead” isn’t magic, then I’d like to know what is! But it’s the kind of magic only God can perform. And it’s magic that can be seen only through the eyes of faith.

And in this passage the author is giving us a description of the nature of faith. He teaches us, first of all, that **faith is belief in God**. However, it’s not simply that God exists, but that God is present with us and is working to our best good. Faith is trusting God in all things.

Max Lucado tells about spending a week years ago visiting the interior of Brazil with a long-time missionary pilot. In his work this missionary pilot flew a circuit of remote towns in a four-seat plane. The plane was not in that great a shape. Lucado quips that “Wilbur and Orville had a sturdier aircraft.”

Lucado confesses that he couldn’t get comfortable in that undersized plane. He kept thinking they were going to crash in some Brazilian jungle and he’d be gobbled up by piranhas or swallowed by an anaconda. He kept shifting around, looking down, and gripping his seat—as if that would help.

Finally the pilot had enough of his squirming. He looked over at Lucado and shouted over the noise of the airplane. “We won’t face anything that I can’t handle,” the pilot shouted. “You might as well trust me to fly the plane.”ⁱ

That’s faith. It’s the kind of faith that Henri Nouwen once described in a story about a family of German trapeze artists called the Flying Rodleights. Henri Nouwen greatly admired the Flying Rodleights. They became close friends and they even let him practice with them on the trapeze.

Once, Nouwen recalls, he asked the leader of this group of trapeze artists about flying through the air. The leader explained his craft like this: “As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher,” he said. “The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air . . .

I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me . . . The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms that his catcher will be there for him.”ⁱⁱ

Do you believe that when you are flying through the air in a time of crisis that God is there, waiting to catch you? That is faith. It is not simply belief that there is a God. It is absolute trust that God cares for you and is always working to your best good.

The author teaches us, secondly, that since we trust God, **faith is living in obedience to God’s will**. Here’s where the rubber meets the road. Abraham didn’t just believe in the existence of God. Because he trusted God Abraham went where God told him to go and did what God wanted him to do. Abraham obeyed God.

Do you believe in God, we ask? “Of course I believe in God. Everybody believes in God.” Do you believe in Jesus Christ? “Well, of course I believe in Jesus Christ. I went to Sunday school. He was quite a man.”

Have you fully committed your life to Jesus—enough so that you will commit all you are and all you have to him? “Now hold on there, I’m not a freaky fanatic, if that’s what you mean. But I’m a Christian. I believe.”

Is that all there is to this Christian thing—simply saying, “I believe?” As I read these words from the letter to the Hebrews—as I read about the victories that were won and the persecutions that were endured—I cannot help but believe that faith is much, much more than simply saying, “I believe.”

If there doesn’t seem to be much magic in church today maybe it’s because our pies are mostly moss. Faith is a total commitment of all we are and all we hope to be for God through faith in Jesus Christ.

This list of the heroes of the Old Testament provided by the writer of Hebrews is a list of persons who put their lives on the line because of their convictions about God. Faith is not simply intellectual assent to an idea. It is a life-changing choice to walk where God would have you go.

The author of our lesson today teaches us that **faith is that unshakable sense of trust that keeps us going through life’s dark and difficult valleys.** All of us walk through the valley under a dark shadow at some time in our lives. Faith is that beacon of light that leads us home to God.

We all get discouraged at some time in our lives. No one is exempt. But that doesn’t mean we give up. There’s always a way out when we allow God’s Spirit to guide us. Faith is a commitment of all we are and hope to be to God. Faith is an assurance that the God who created us is with us in every battle we may face. Faith is that unshakable sense of trust that keeps us going through life’s dark and difficult valleys.

And **faith is a promise that, as Abraham described it, there is a “city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”**

We speak far less about heaven these days than in years past. We’re the secular society—our kingdom is the here and now. No wonder we have so little joy. No wonder our lives exude so little magic. No wonder so many of us dread the process of aging and are haunted by the fear of death.

How foolish it is to denigrate the most blessed hope that the Christian possesses. How shallow it is to conclude that life ends at the grave. Faith—to really be faith—always has a forward look, a positive expectation, an unquenchable hope. Such a spirit comes from a lifetime of commitment and trust. There are good days and there are bad, but there is always that belief that no matter what, life goes on.

I pray we all strive to have the faith that Abraham had and the belief that God will always be with us regardless of the obstacles we may face . . . even into eternity. That’s faith.

ⁱ Max Lucado, *Anxious for Nothing: Finding Calm in a Chaotic World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), p. 33.

ⁱⁱ Robert A. Jonas, *Henri Nouwen: Spirituality and Practice*, Orbis Books, 1998.