Pentecost 9 “By Faith” Hebrews 11

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Here we pick up a series of readings from the letter to the Hebrews, and this is the good stuff that most of us are familiar with. Hebrews has an unfortunate fate among the people of God. It is a little like a movie that the critics raved about but the theater going public simply did not like. Hebrews is perhaps one of the most thoughtful and interesting explorations of Christology in the whole New Testament, but we pay very little attention to it.

Part of the problem is that the argumentation is so complex. Other than Romans, it is probably the longest single argument in the whole NT. It is not anything like the accessible stories of Jesus’ ministry or the briefer letters of Paul.

Here, at the end of the sermon, and that is really what the letter to the Hebrews reads like, the preacher is wrapping things up. Like all good preachers, he wants to leave them with something memorable, and this is very memorable. He has been discoursing on the superiority of Jesus over both the angels and Moses’ covenant.

The writer is cataloguing a number of OT characters, and he is doing this with some references to popular religious literature of the day. It is a little like he references some details from a Max Lucado book as he goes along. Ssome of this material is not found in the Old Testament but in the more popular literature that is found in Jewish circles in the first century and much of which has come to light in the Dead Sea scrolls. This is especially true in the comments about Enoch and some of the really old characters therein.

The primary point of course is that all these folks are tied together by faith, and we are also in the same faith. They died without having seen the things for which they were hoping; we also live by faith and not by sight. We too hear of a promised land and often are disappointed when the next curve in life does not reveal it to us, but only another stretch of dismally familiar highway. But we walk the same road as those saints of olden times.

Abraham walked this very type of road. Even characters like Enoch and Abel whose stories and names come down to us shrouded in the deepest mystery, they shared this same faith with us.

In short, we are not alone.

There are a couple of other things to which we might pay attention to here. The first is that each of the people commended were very different from one another. Noah condemned the world; he lived by faith. Abraham trusted; he lived by faith. Abel died but his righteous worship means he still lives. Enoch pleased God and Sarah conceived when she was old. They are all different. Faith is not a melting pot in which everyone comes out looking the same; rather, it is much more of a stew pot – the potatoes are still potatoes, the carrots are still carrots, and the individuals within the kingdom are not homogenized into some human uniformity.

Another important element of this text is the idea that every one of these heroic figures died without seeing their faith completely fulfilled. Abraham was promised offspring as numerous as the stars. He had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. He believed until his dying day, and that means he was still looking toward God for promises yet to be fulfilled. Yet now, even Gentile Christian children sing of the children of Abraham.

The other element which we may want to consider is the image of a pilgrim. It is not so powerfully lived in our age as it has been in prior generations, such as the medieval period. But no one wrote so powerfully about this image and developed it quite so fully as Augustine in the “City of God” a title he took from this very passage of Hebrews. We do sometimes look at our lives as pilgrims in that we are traveling through this life looking forward to a new home and a new life and a new creation. By faith we live in a “now, not yet” reality. And we view these promises as a sure and certain hope. That is the result of faith. It has to do with what God has promised to his people.

The “things not seen” (11:1) are God’s future acts of end times judgment and salvation (11:7), as well as Christ’s presence with the congregation and its participation with Him in the heavenly liturgy, in Word and Sacrament.

Each of the following examples in chapter 11, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and the longer list in the verses following our reading, demonstrates the truth that "the people of old were attested" by God himself because they had "this kind of faith." They did not just bear witness to Him by their faith; God himself bore witness to them as people of faith by granting what they had hoped for from Him. Through the Scriptures, He still affirms that each of them is his "righteous one … by faith" (10:38). Each of these in some way shows how faith produces hope or the vision of what is unseen (11:3).

The catalog of the faithful seems to begin, surprisingly, with the author of Hebrews and his congregation as we read in verse 3 that "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." Yet this "we" is far more inclusive than just that. He associates them with all the people of faith including this congregation. Like all the others, he and his congregation believe in the creative power of God's Word and perceive God's hidden craftsmanship in his creation and maintenance of the world and its sequence of ages. So together with all people of faith, the congregation affirms: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible."

This is a confession of faith in God's original creation of the material and spatial world by his spoken Word, as well as in his ongoing arrangement of it temporally in every period of its existence. That is an article of faith, for by faith God's people perceive that God has done this by His spoken word, just as they come to believe and perceive this by faith in his spoken word. For faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

So, we come full circle here. We are poor miserable sinners who cannot save ourselves from this sinful condition. But God has sent His son into the world to live the perfect life for us, to die for us the death that we have merited, and to be raised from the dead to new life that we also may be raised in a resurrection like His.

And all this we receive apart from any works, by grace, as a gift, through faith, that we receive likewise as a gift. Open your ears and receive it. Open your mouths and taste and see that the Lord is good as He gives himself to you in bread and wine, His very body and blood, given and shed for you.

Now that you have been rescued from sin death and the devil, your new life begins right now. Having received forgiveness freely, freely forgive others. Having received life, cherish all life and live it to the fullest. Having received salvation, tell others of the Good News in Jesus Christ.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!

John W. Kleinig, *Hebrews*, ed. Curtis P. Giese, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 556–564.