

In the Silence

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

August 8, 2010; Tim Devine

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

Thomas Merton was a twentieth century American Catholic writer, a social activist, a Trappist monk, and wrote a best selling autobiography in 1948 called The Seven Storey Mountain. In another book, Thoughts in Solitude, he wrote a prayer that could very easily accompany the reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews that we heard a few moments ago. That prayer is as follows:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

And there are plenty of people that we can imagine as having great faith or courage or perseverance, who also might share these same struggles with “*assurance*” and “*conviction*” even when we feel that we might be the only ones.

A more well-known person to many than Thomas Merton would probably be Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. An accompanying quote to our reading from Hebrews that is attributed to Dr. King is this:

Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.

If Dr. King had seen the whole staircase, would he have gone forward?

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

And after we hear this statement, the author of Hebrews comes up with a set of people who have lived out their lives of faith. They are examples who are offered to help that particular early Christian community with whatever difficulties and challenges it was evidently facing – and serious enough to warrant this letter – the Epistle to the Hebrews.

And examples are often what it takes for any of us to get the message. Perhaps faith is so hard to define that it is easier or better to use such examples than to write a lot of

theoretical things about it. Examples show us the experience of real people in a real relationship with God. And examples can help us to grasp the meaning of faith through experience, not a precise or scholarly theological definition that too often ends up in words or dogma that feels empty or meaningless or even irrelevant.

And yet “*things hoped for*” and “*things not seen*” are hard to accept in our secular world of instant gratification, personal rights, and empirical proof. We are not good at mystery. For generations now – whether it has been Sherlock Holmes or Perry Mason or Jessica Fletcher or the current CSI crime teams in Las Vegas, Miami, and New York – mystery is OK and it may even be intriguing for awhile – but we expect the case to be solved and the dramatic confession to occur within the hour.

And we sure don't like when that doesn't happen. What? To be continued? A cliff-hanger? A two-parter? You've got to be kidding!

I think another part of today's Bible reading that is uncomfortable for us is the idea that rests in the beginning of the third part of the reading, the idea that:

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

In present-day Jordan there is a tourist site called Mt. Nebo. It is a beautiful spot on a high hill overlooking the Dead Sea and across into the lands to the west – whether called Canaan or Palestine or Israel or the Holy Land or the Promised Land. On a clear day you can make out Jerusalem about 20 miles away.

In the Biblical narrative God takes Moses there at the close of the forty years of desert wandering in the Sinai wilderness, and shows Moses the Promised Land. But that is as far as Moses gets. In the Biblical account he dies and is buried there.

In our impatient and balanced and fair world, this seems terribly unfair. A contemporary person might text: “Hey God, I've done everything you've asked of me, and this is as far as I get? What gives?”

But not Moses. There is no record of his commentary, if any.

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

If that is an honest statement about faith, then the truth is that Moses got more than he was promised. He got to see the Promised Land.

And, among other unusual details, the Bible states that Moses was 120 years old when he died. Now, taking that as a graceful metaphor rather than as a literal reality, we can assume that Moses was old and he was tired and he was maybe he was even ready to die. Maybe it would have been too much for him after leading those troublesome stiff-necked followers and then having to deal with setting up a new society once they got there. In

today's world it might be a little like simply savoring simply winning the Presidency and then just going home and not having to deal with Congress.

No, there are no guarantees:

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

And the primary way of listening for God is not through hearing a dramatic old-style Hollywood voice-over. No, it is often just making sense out of the silence.

In the silence. In the mystery. In the in-between times. That is where we have the most experience – and the most potential to find our faith.

Author Frederick Buechner writes in Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons, that:

Faith is different from theology because theology is reasoned, systematic, and orderly, whereas faith is disorderly, intermittent, and full of surprises... Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a position on than a movement toward, less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting.

Amen.

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 God 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, God has prepared a city for them.