

“The Substance of Faith”

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Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

George came into my office, on the verge of a faith crisis. He was a biology teacher, who taught his students how the world worked, according to the rules of science. He was wonderful at his job, the students adored him, and they learned a lot. George was also a dedicated Christian, who loved the teachings of Jesus. He went to church every Sunday and served on the session.

The crisis came when he realized that he was having to turn on and off a mental switch when he went to church. He had to be one person in the classroom and another person in the sanctuary, and he felt like a hypocrite. It left him wondering: How could he be a man of science and also a man of faith?

In my years as a pastor, I’ve heard the story many times, in many different ways. People feel like they need to choose between science or faith. They don’t know how to reconcile the two things.

It makes sense that people would become confused. In medieval times, the church often brought heresy charges against men of science. Even today, we hear about people rejecting science, on religious grounds. Creationists reject evolution, because they believe that the world was created in seven days, 6,000 years ago. Or someone might not believe in birth control, because of the biblical command to “be fruitful and multiply.” I’ve even heard a person say that he does not believe in global warming, because it’s not written up in the book of Revelation. In one horrible incident, a woman I grew up with (we went to the same church), allowed her child to die of bee stings. Because she believed that God would heal her through prayer, she rejected science, and didn’t take her baby to the hospital.

Many of these stories are portrayed through the media, so it’s hard to understand how we should reconcile science and faith. How do we do this? How do we understand faith in our time? Is faith a set of beliefs that we must accept as scientific fact in order to be Christians? Or is faith something else? How do we take an ancient book, heavy with poetry and depth and wisdom, and translate it into our age of science, psychology, and technology?

Hebrews talks about faith in a time of historic transition. This is a letter that was written to a Christian community that was trying to decide what to do with Gentile converts. Christianity was a sect of Judaism, so when Gentiles started becoming Christians, they didn’t know how to make sense of faith. Should they make the Gentiles become Jews, follow the food laws, and (the biggest obstacle) get circumcised?

In the midst of this debate, the author writes this beautiful passage to explain what faith is: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for.”

The words remind me of another historic transition in our understanding of faith—when we had the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy. Fundamentalist Christians upheld five things that they said one must literally believe to be a Christian, while Modernists explained that faith was something different. Faith was not set in stone, faith was not a list of things you must believe, without a doubt, or concern for science. Faith was more pliable and dynamic. And there are different ways to believe things. Stories in the Bible are important as symbols, allegories, and mythos. And just because someone might not believe them has hard chronological history or we don’t see the words of the Bible as a science textbook, doesn’t take away from the weight, depth, beauty, and wisdom of them.

All of this brings me to one of the most interesting definitions of faith, authored by Paul Tillich. Tillich was teaching at the University of Frankfurt, when Adolph Hitler became chancellor. Tillich was an outspoken critic of Nazism, and so Hitler removed him from his post. Tillich moved to the US and began teaching at Union Seminary in New York.

About 20 years later, Tillich wrote a book called *The Dynamics of Faith*. In it, he struggles with faith in modern times. And much of what the religious world was wrestling with was how we construct a faith that would not be swallowed up by nationalism, a faith that would take the concerns of modern science, and the doubts of philosophy seriously.

So, just as the author of Hebrews defines faith as “the substance of things hoped for,” Tillich explains faith as our “ultimate concern.” Our ultimate concern can destroy us, or it can heal us. He brings up a couple of things that people are often concerned with—namely nationalism or success. He says that the problem with nationalism or success being your ultimate concern, is that these things are transitory, short-lived, and they will eventually fail.

For people in Tillich’s moment, nationalism became their main goal. And so we can see pictures of priests flanking Nazi officials, healing Hitler. The church was in crisis!

Now, many of us can probably relate to the idea of success being our ultimate concern. As successful as we might be, it’s transitory. There will be a time when our careers will begin to falter. The promotions will stop coming, we will begin to see other people who are rising stars, who begin to surpass us in our work. If success is our ultimate concern, then our faith breaks down. And if we do not learn to re-center ourselves, if we do not learn to doubt our faith at that moment, then we begin to break down, as humans.

So in Tillich’s thought, doubting is not the sort of skepticism that we bring to a scientific inquiry. It is an essential part of the process of faith. It is the other side of the coin, because it helps us to reorient ourselves to what should be our ultimate concern. And most of our lives take a lot of reorienting.

You see, the difficult thing about faith, is that we are finite beings trying to comprehend the infinite. We want to contain the infinite in a tidy list, that we can hold in the palm of our hand. But we can't. We'll never be able to do that.

Instead, as Tillich writes, "where faith is there is an awareness of the holy." When we have faith, we realize that we are a part of the sanctuary of life, and the presence of the divine surrounds us. We can understand that we do not hold God, but God holds us.

God is pregnant with us. We can no more comprehend the fullness of God than an infant can comprehend the fullness of her mother.

Evelyn Colella was baptized today, in a sign of that outpouring of God's love. This act reminds us that waters of baptism have been flowing for two thousand years, and the love that those tiny drops represent is infinite. They have touched so many of us. And when we can wake up to the reality of that love, that acceptance surrounding us, *that is faith*.

If our nation fails us, if we do not achieve all of the achievements that we imagine, then we reorient ourselves. We know that success is not our ultimate concern, it is not the essence of what we hope for. Instead, our faith is waking up to the realization that God's presence surrounds us, and that the waters of baptism nourish us.

To the glory of God our Creator,
God our Liberator,
And God our Nurturer. Amen.