

By Faith

November 4, 2018

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On March 28, 1971, seventy-nine people signed the charter of the newly formed Grace Baptist Church. A church was born! But by the way of things it was conceived months earlier. Janice Comer told me that when my grandfather, C.C. Holland, resigned as pastor from Front Street Baptist some members possessed of a heart for missions began to look around for another church to join. Soon they began to meet other Front Street members as they were looking at churches!

On November 29, 1970 some of these folk decided to meet and discuss the question: should they join other churches or form a new one? As they searched for the answer they decided to contact some other friends. On January 10, 1971, about thirty people met at the Harrington home to discuss organizing a new church. Joe Parlier was named temporary chairman and Clara Rogers temporary secretary. They worshipped together for the first time on January 24. On February 17 they chose the name of the new church, Grace Baptist, then on March 28 we were officially formed.

The key ingredient was faith, as Hebrews described it, “The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

The text for today from Hebrews was written to the Jewish/Christian community in Rome about a half century after Jesus.

The community was now a second generation community, the children and grand-children of the founding members, plus new converts who never knew the apostles. The founding vision had faded; persecution was mounting. What you sense between the words of the book is uncertainty, anxiety.

The writer is calling the church to a renewed vision and issues a roll call of faith, again, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

He starts with Creation itself: what is seen is created by what is unseen? You can read Creation as a text which you can read and see what the Creator is like.

Soon we see Noah’s name, who built an ark when there was no rain in sight, much less a flood. By faith.

Then come Abraham and Sarah. By faith Abraham set off across the desert to a land “he knew not of”. They lived in temporary dwellings, as did Grace, looking for a city whose builder and maker is God.

By faith Sarah conceived a child though she was past the age and Abraham was “as good as dead,” procreationally speaking. As Robin might say to Batman “Holy Viagra Batman!” This happened because they considered God faithful who had promised.”

“Because they had considered God faithful who had promised.” *There is a faithfulness at the heart of things.* Faith at its most basic is not a set of beliefs but a trust in the One who made you. “I know *whom* I have believed,” scripture says—which is prior and deeper than “I know *what* I have believed.”

The roll call continues: by faith Moses as a baby was hid from Pharaoh’s troops, that is by the faith of his mother who disobeyed the King’s commands. Let us praise the faith of mothers today! By faith Moses chose the plight of his own people rather than the fleeting pleasures of Pharaoh’s palace. By faith Moses led the Hebrew people out of slavery, kept the first Passover, crossed the Red Sea.

By faith Rahab the prostitute offered hospitality to Hebrew spies and joined what God was up to.

“And what more can I say,” the writer says, “though time fail me”, and off he goes again. Here comes Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel and others, who “through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, shut lion’s

mouths, quenched burning flames, escaped the sword, turned weakness into strength.

Then he tells of the faithful who did not fare so well: those tortured, imprisoned, stoned, sawed in two, killed by the sword. The world he says “was not worthy of them.” “They did not receive what was promised”, the text says, but “having seen it greeted it from afar.”

Finally we all look for the land where all promises of God come true, that “land that is faired than day,” as the old hymn goes, that land, to quote Thomas Wolfe, which is “more large than earth, more kind than home.”

We could go on, though time fails me. I’ll mention these. Jeremiah who bought a worthless piece of land from his uncle which lay in the path of the enemy’s invasion because he heard God’s promise: “Thus says the Lord, ‘houses and fields and vineyards will once again be bought and sold in this land.’”

Or Daniel who refused to stop his prayers and ended up in the lion’s den, or his friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refused to bow down to the King’s idol and when faced with death in the fiery furnace said, “Our God is able to deliver us, *but if not*, even then we shall not bow down”. *But if not*. Fearless words of faith.

I will go on, thought time fails me. Paul who traveled at great risk across the Mediterranean world to carry the gospel and who died in Rome. And Lydia, who opened her home to be the first house in Philippi.

By faith Patrick returned to Ireland where he had been carried by pirates as a boy so he could spread Christianity to the green island.

By faith Hildegard of Bingen, mystic, musician and healer opened a monastery for women.

By faith Martin Luther, smitten by grace, reformed the church, translated the bible into German and risked life and reputation.

By faith Roger Williams, cast out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony into the howling wilderness went to Rhode Island and established it as the first American colony of religious freedom, and founded the First Baptist Church in America.

By faith Sojourner Truth, a freed slave, preached and fought for the emancipation of women and the abolition of slavery.

By faith Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian opposed Hitler, decried the German church's allegiance to Hitler, and died by order of Hitler.

By faith Martin Luther King Jr. led the civil rights movement in America. He endured great opposition and hatred and was finally felled by an assassin's bullet. We give thanks for his bravery and vision.

By faith Dorothy Day, once a socialist and atheist, turned to God and began her mission to the poor in New York City and beyond.

By faith, by faith, by faith.

II

And let us remember this day those who by faith 47 years ago began this spiritual experiment called Grace Baptist Church.

By faith we called our first pastor, David Comer, though some thought his hair was a little long.

By faith we bought this land and built this church.

Now for a continued roll call of faith: the names of the founding members still with us. As I call your names will you stand, and will your families stand.

Mary Ruth Godfrey

Donn Alan Wardo

David Comer

Janice Comer

Sarah Adams

Billy Adams

Nellie Grant

Nancy Milstead

Phyllis Grant Munson

Grady (Eddie) Lippard

LeAnda Lippard Barnard

Andora Lippard Nicholson

Clara Rogers

Lisa Rogers Barber

We are so grateful to you for helping found us and continuing to enrich us.

III

Therefore, therefore, the writer of the Hebrews says, with four exclamation marks, *since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*—living and those in the balcony of heaven. They cheer us on even now,

Let us lay aside every weight—what weight would you lay aside this day? What weight are you ready to lay aside? What weight do you need to lay aside? Let us then lay them aside?

And the sin which clings so close-- sins which are like old clothes that no longer fit us. Reynolds Price speaks of our “loyal flaws”. What clingy sins would you like to cast away?

And let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.
Perseverance, determination, resolve!

Looking where? *Ahead! Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.* We are on a holy journey toward God, with God, into God with Jesus our trustworthy guide. He is the one who shows us our true self, our beginning and our destiny. He is the one who leads us in the love of God and neighbor. We look to him.

IV

When I was in the ninth grade I was running the first leg of our team’s 440 yard relay. I took off as fast as I could, and as I came to the first turn handed my baton off to the second runner.

My dad, bless his memory, and my younger brother Jim, who was five or six at the time, were watching in the stands. When Jim saw me slow down and stop, he cried out in great disappointment to my dad: “Dad! He quit!” Of course he didn’t understand that it was a relay race.

We have honored this day those of our company who have died these past 47 years. They did not quit. They, to quote Paul, “fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith” And they have been received into God’s eternal home.

But before they did, they handed the baton to us. Now we have our leg of the race to run. Here is the way to receive a baton:

When the runner nears start running easily in stride keep your eyes fixed ahead, extend your right arm backward, the palm of your hand up and open. When you feel the metal of the baton rest in your hand, grip it and go!

We lift our praise and thanks this day for those who began the race and are handing the baton to us. As Dag Hammarsjold wrote:

For all that has been, Thanks!

For all that shall be, Yes!