

**Faithful Witnesses**  
**Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

Raise your right hand. “Do you swear or affirm to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” With that I found myself on the witness stand in court in Charlevoix in September 2004. I was seated in the witness box. The jury was to my left and the judge to my right. The plaintiff’s attorney stood in front of me standing between me and the defense attorneys. “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?” I don’t know about you, but I had never been a witness before and I was scared to death. I wasn’t scared because I thought I had done anything wrong or even that I thought the outcome would affect me in any way. I was scared because I was totally unfamiliar with being a witness in court. My only experience of being a witness had been from watching *Law and Order*, *Perry Mason* and all the other TV shows and movies I have watched. That is not enough experience for me to embody the idea of being a witness. I was tense, I was uncomfortable, it was confusing, in short, I was very nervous. My attorneys (actually the attorneys for the company I worked for, which was being sued for wrongful discharge of a contractor) had told me to look at the jury when I answered my questions. Remember they were off to my left; the attorney who was asking the questions was about as far to the right as he could get and still be in the courtroom. Now my mother taught me to look at people when they spoke to me. It was hard to look at the attorney asking the questions and look at the jury at the same time. I am sure, if you had a video of my court appearance I would look a little like someone watching a tennis match. I could not be both faithful to my mother’s teaching and to the instructions of my attorneys. I had to choose. Sometimes I did what was ‘natural’ to me and looked at the attorney, both while he was asking the questions and while I was answering. Then my more recent instructions from the attorneys would kick in and I would whip my head around to look at the jury. I was way out of my comfort zone.

That was bad enough but then I entered this alternative universe – maybe you have been there – whatever you thought you knew, you couldn’t remember and when asked simple questions you started to give answers that were anything but simple. They began to ask me about my education and work experience, and I was having trouble remembering who I was and what I had been doing for the last twenty years. Has that ever

happened to you? You are telling the truth, but you feel like you are lying. Right up to the time I went on the witness stand, I had hope (but no confidence) in the trial being settled. I wanted to be excused as a witness, I wanted a miracle to happen. I had hope but no faith nor any confidence that any miracle was coming my way.

I couldn't even trust my own eyes. At one point a film clip was shown and it had a date right at the beginning, as big as anything. It was about the nuclear plant project – one of the PR movies that were made while we were tearing down the nuclear plant to explain the process to people. It had a date right at the beginning. Something like, July 2000. Well at the end of the film clip when the attorney asked me what the date was I kept insisting it was June. I don't know why. Here I am swearing to tell the truth, and I could not even remember or rely on what was in front of my eyes to help me out. They are asking me questions about things that had happened two, three, four years before, things that did not seem very important to me at the time. It was a struggle to recall, not to mention the fact that the plaintiff's attorney was trying to make a point which was not at all how I remembered events, so even the way questions were asked was it was hard to answer truthfully. Like one of those questions, "Have you stopped beating your children, yet?" There is no way to answer that without admitting you beat your children. Well, after about an hour – seemed like 10 – on the stand, they let me out of my misery and dismissed me. I don't think I have ever been so relieved in my life that I could actually stand and walk down from the jury box. I was seriously afraid I was just going to have to be carried away. What a relief! I had been called to be a witness to events that I had lived through in my work life. I was called to bring the past into the present in a way which would also affect the future, depending on how the case was decided. I had been a witness for the defense, and we won the case, as it turns out.

That was my only sorry effort to be a civil witness. I think sometimes of how I would have failed to be a witness for Christ in the tough environment the people who received the letter to the Hebrews faced. They had to embody their faith—it wasn't simply a matter of spiritual agreement. They were witnesses to the transformative power of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ in their lives. For them, the work of being witnesses was not simply sitting in an air conditioned court room, trying to maintain their composure recounting particular events. For them, there was no relief in sight; they were not going to be excused from the

witness box to go back to their daily routines; their lives were lived out as faith-filled witnesses to the power of salvation. They had been and were being persecuted, the author of Hebrews said, “you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.” (Heb10:32-34)

How had they endured the hostility, the trials, that persecution? They had endured it, not by wishful thinking, but by the clear-eyed faith that gave them hope and assurance of things as yet unseen. The writer of Hebrews reminded them as well that they could look back on their traditions to draw strength for their time of trial. Could Noah know that the flood was coming by his senses – by his sight, touch, smell, feelings, and the rest? No, he had to trust in God’s word for his life. And despite the evidence to the contrary, he built the arc. The weathermen were not predicting a flood, his neighbors would have laughed at his foolishness, but still, Noah trusted. Noah trusted God’s word for his life, and he built the arc. Abraham and Sarah, an elderly childless couple, told by God to go to a new land, told by God that they would have a son. Could they empirically prove that what God told them was true? Could they see that this would be a better life? No, they had to trust in God’s word for their lives and go forth with confidence, trusting that God was preparing a new world for them. Sarah even laughed at the idea that she would bear a child at her age, but both Sarah and Abraham trusted in God’s word – they had hope and confidence in that word. Enoch was also mentioned —one who was so faithful that he went straight into heaven at his death.

The ancient church fathers, the people who received the letter to the Hebrews and so many others shows how to have that confidence through their experience of faith. They are our church heroes and they trusted in the reality of God’s sustaining love, because they knew that the forefathers and foremothers of the faith had done so, and God had kept God’s promises to them. But what is unique about their faith experience is that it is not simply a matter of intellectual or even emotional consent and acknowledgment, as we often think of faith. Their faith was also an experiential faith, a faith of action or as Jeremy said last week – a risk-taking faith.

Witnesses, whether in court, in the Bible, or in our church today, have to have the lived experience to back up their testimony. Not just an experience of God or the Holy Spirit in their lives, but the experience of living out the good news through their lives. They/we have to embody our faith. They/we are not witnesses, according to our writer in Hebrews, if they do not, in some way live out their faith. They/we are not witnesses if they/we are not obedient to God's call on their lives. Those the writer lifted up as exemplars of the faith all had to trust in things that were unseen – Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, all stepped out in faith as they sought to be obedient.

Obedience in Greek is based on the word for hearing. Hearing that incorporates action is obedience. Our obedience then means we have heard the gospel message and then have embodied it in action. Our lives take a radical turn toward God when we have faith and we step out in obedience into the unknown future to which God calls us. No matter how hard we try or how much we plan, we cannot know the future. God asks us to step into that future with God at our side, in obedience, with the assurance of God's word on our hearts. God endows us with the Holy Spirit and equips us, through study, prayer, community discernment and God's word to go out to participate in bringing God's realm to earth.

Tradition, obedience, action are all used in the service of faith. A faith that requires forward looking risk-taking. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (NRSV) [or 'Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.' (NLT)] Hebrews 11:3 "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."

"Faith is then the confidence that it is OK to yearn and that when we yearn deeply there is a God shape to our hope and God is real. When we set out in that journey [of faith] we will, of course, find there is always further travel, but that at many points along the way we find...[the One] who walks beside us. The end and the beginning meet, as it were, in the midst of our journey. Knowing that and living in that confidence is faith."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C *Epistle* Passage from the Lectionary: Pentecost 11." available at <<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/loader/CEpPentecost11.htm>> accessed on 5 August 2010.

The world needs such faith today. The world needs our witness to the faith that is embodied in the sacred tradition God has given to us through the Scriptures, through the salvific work of Jesus the Christ and through the power of our Holy Spirit. The world needs our witness to combat all the –isms that are so rampant —racism, sexism, capitalism, among others, as well as the widespread destruction of our planet. As witnesses we are called to both embody that faith in our lives and speak to that faith. We are called, we might say, to take the witness stand and testify through the ways in which we show hope and assurance, love and justice in our lives. Yet we are afraid to do that at times. We are afraid to set off to places we have not yet seen and do not feel comfortable in, even when we think God is calling us there. Have you been hearing that nudging of God and argued back – “Oh, that must not be God, I don’t know how to do that! God wouldn’t call me to do that!” Sarah probably said that to Abraham too. We fear because it’s unknown and we don’t really live into the confidence in the kingdom of God. We fear stepping out in faith. We don’t have the assurance that we have indeed caught that glimpse of the arrival of God’s kingdom on earth, we do not trust that Jesus’ death broke the power of sin and death in our life.

Think of the African impala – they are amazing leapers. They can jump to a height of over 10 feet. One leap can cover a distance greater than 30 feet. Yet the impala can be kept in a zoo enclosure with a 3-foot high wall. How can that be? Because they will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall. That is one way we approach life, as well, isn’t it? We even have a saying to cover it: “look before you leap”

How different that approach to life from the life of faith described in Hebrews. “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” How’s that for a working definition of our faith life? It’s the opposite of look before you leap. Faith is jumping without being able to see where our feet will fall.<sup>2</sup>

There’s a story of a little boy on the second floor of a burning building, “Jump!” his father calls out to him. “I will catch you.” The little boy cries out timidly, “But, daddy, I can’t see you.” And his father says, “Yes, but I can see you.” That is the kind of father that the writer of Hebrews says that we have. We have examples of the faithful in the heroes of our faith; we have a glimpse even here on earth. “Now faith is the

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<sup>2</sup> King Duncan, *Leaping Where You Cannot Look*, [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com).

assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” May your witness be faithful. May you have confidence in God’s love, and may you trust God’s call on your life. May you be a faithful and obedient witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.