

“Faith: Remembering the Past, Envisioning the Future”

Hebrews 11:1-2; 12:1-2

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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Many of you no doubt remember reading Charles Dickens’ book, *A Tale of Two Cities*—or seeing one of its many film adaptations—which tells a story set in the cities of London and Paris during the frightening and violent days of the French Revolution. Today, I would like to tell a tale of two other groups of people living in turbulent times. The first group of people was a congregation of Jewish Christians living somewhere in the Roman Empire outside the Holy Lands, during the tumultuous years after the destruction of the Jewish Temple, which occurred in the year 70. And the other group of people? Us, the congregation of Oakland Christian Church in the year 2017.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is sometimes called “the riddle of the New Testament” because we cannot be sure who wrote it, or who the original readers were, or the exact date of writing. Without going into all the details—which would take far too much time for a sermon—let me say that I find myself agreeing with the majority of biblical scholars today in proposing the following historical backdrop.

The author was clearly a devout Jewish Christian whose native tongue was Greek rather than Hebrew, who used the Greek translation of the Old Testament rather than the Hebrew original, and who had been educated in one of the leading university cities of the Roman Empire, possibly in the first century’s most famous center of learning, Alexandria, Egypt. The Epistle to the Hebrews contains the most eloquent Greek in the entire New Testament, and it makes brilliant use of the interpretative methodology that had been developed in Alexandria. When you read the New Testament and other writings of the earliest Christians, one name rises to the surface as the most likely writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Apollos, the brilliant Jewish Christian orator from Alexandria, who worked as an associate of the Apostle Paul alongside Luke, Timothy, Titus, Priscilla, and Aquila, helping to strengthen the churches Paul had founded during his three missionary journeys.

As I reconstruct the history behind the Epistle to the Hebrews, I think Apollos wrote this brilliant sermon-like letter sometime between the late 60s and the 80s, and sent it to a Christian congregation or group of congregations who were going through a very difficult time. They were Jews who had come to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Like all other Jewish Christians of their day, they had continued to worship in the local synagogue on the Sabbath, and on Sunday mornings they met in homes or open spaces to commemorate the Messiah’s resurrection. But, as I mentioned a few weeks ago when we looked at the community for whom the Gospel of Matthew was written, during the late 60s and early 70s Jewish Christians were expelled from the synagogues. In essence, they were told they were no longer considered Jews. And as a consequence, many of their former friends—and even family members—stopped associating with them.

As you can imagine, this was a traumatic experience. They weren't sure of who they were, or of what the future held. They were cut off from all the beautiful traditions and rituals that had given their lives meaning, and they weren't sure of how they were to move forward. Their world had been turned upside-down, inside-out. The future looked bleak.

Apollos wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews to address this distressing situation. It's a brilliant letter filled with stirring passages designed to encourage the readers to remain faithful to Christ and live lives of confidence; rather than shrinking back in fear and discouragement, Apollos exhorted them to venture forth boldly into the brave new world that lay before them.

This morning I would like for us to reflect on the argument set forth in Chapters 11 and 12. Apollos spoke of the crucial importance of faith for living a bold Christian life. I sometimes hear well-meaning Christians describe faith as "belief without any evidence;" or even worse, "belief against the evidence." But this is not faith as it is understood in the Bible, for faith is based on evidence, as we shall see. Of course, that evidence is not always empirical.

Consider how Apollos described faith. "Faith," he wrote, "is the confidence of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." The Greek word here translated confidence denotes "the underlying essence that gives reality to a thing." As one commentator put it, "Faith gives subjective reality to the to the aspirations of hope."¹ That is, "faith gives to things future, which as yet are only hoped for, all the reality of actual present existence; . . . [faith] convinces us of the reality of things unseen and brings us into their presence."² Thus, faith is the foundation upon which hope is built. Let me repeat that. Faith in God—*trust that God is for us*—is the foundation upon which a Christian's confident hope for the future is built. The bold Christian life Apollos urged his readers to manifest is based on faith that *God is for us and accompanies us into the future*.

But what is the evidence that gives rise to such bold faith? Faith arises when we reflect on the past acts of God. Notice that Apollos urged his readers *first* to remember the past, and only *then* did he call for them to envision the future. To assist them in this process, he created a remarkable Hall of Fame of Faith in which he reminded his readers of the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, Samuel, David, and the prophets.³ *Only then*, at the conclusion of this impressive summary of the lives of these faithful people and their spirit-empowered accomplishments, did he write: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Having *first* encouraged the Hebrews to remember the past, Apollos *then* urged them to envision a bold future where Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of their faith, was already at work blazing a trail for them to follow.

What a dramatic metaphor! Like the pioneers in olden days who blazed trails westward across the vast, uncharted territory that eventually became the United States, Apollos pictured Jesus as already a step ahead of us in life, our “pioneer of faith” blazing a spiritual trail for us to follow.

What a powerful message! I am convinced that this is exactly the message we, the present congregation of Oakland Christian Church, need to hear and to heed. You see, like the original readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews, we too live in a very troubled time—a time in which we have witnessed a sharp numerical decline in Christianity; a time in which an increasing number of churches are closing their doors; a time some are even describing as “the last gasp of Christianity” or even “a post-Christian time.” What a bleak portrait of the future those words paint!

But without denying the troubling realities of our day, I am convinced that, like the original readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews, we *first* need to remember the past; and *after* we have done that, we need to envision a bold future, a future we feel God is calling us—is wooing us—to enter, a future where Jesus is blazing a trail for us to follow.

Here’s my proposal: I want us to use the first Sundays of 2018 to give heed to the counsel of Apollos. *First*, I want us to remember the past, the past of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in general, and the past of Oakland Christian Church in particular. What an encouraging history of faith we will discover! And then *second*, I want us to envision the future to which we are called as the current congregation of Oakland Christian Church. What an exciting future awaits us! And, as a special element, each week the beautiful bowl made from one of the 145-year-old rim beams of our sanctuary will serve as our physical link between past and future, and our touchstone for our work of *remembering* and *envisioning*.

The new year promises to be an exciting time at Oakland, and I hope you will join us in this exciting adventure. But in the remaining weeks of 2017, we will journey through the expectant and joyous seasons of Advent and Christmas—a journey which begins next week!

Faith: remembering the past and envisioning the future.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ The Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (web).

² Marcus Dods, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, vol. 4 (web.)

³ Hebrews 11:2-40.