

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

- [If you can, please watch the very short video clip from the "Wizard of OZ" that is posted linked here. I'll come back to Dorothy and her "ruby red slippers" in the sermon. **WATCH VIDEO CLIP NOW...** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cWKkjTzukM>]
- When I left you in *Genesis*, we were just one genealogy—just a part of one chapter—away from narrowing the story of God's redemptive plan down to one human channel—one man we usually call by his later-lengthened name, "*Abraham*."
- I returned to reading *Genesis* in earnest preparing for the time we will be back meeting together at 5590 N. Nevada or maybe even for teaching remotely.
- Of course, with all that has happened unexpectedly to change our living circumstances, I returned with a different mindset—maybe a different *focus* would be a better way to put it. I'm sure you too are seeing some things differently than you did a month ago.
- I read the stories of *Abram* who becomes *Abraham*, the Father of a great family—a nation that becomes a whole people of God.
- Abraham's story is a story of faith in the LORD and thus faith in his promises. It is *such* a story of faith, it becomes a major part of *Hebrews* 11. In that New Testament letter, the author makes clear how faith in the LORD was the foundation for God's working through his people to accomplish his redemptive plan.
- The other major thing I noticed as I was studying this "*foundational faith*," from *Genesis* 12 on, was that Abraham, and others who had faith in the LORD, were inconsistent in how they lived their lives—the choices they made—the mistakes they made—even the sins they made.
- Somehow human faith that is highly commended by God in the New Testament can be the faith of a human who is not always absolutely

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 **UNEDITED**

righteous in his living. That's interesting and counter to much theology being taught today in our present circumstances.

- This seemed like an important truth for me, who sometimes lives inconsistently, and maybe it is for you as well. I didn't want it to be an excuse for unrighteous living.
- I should add that, in the context of the 2020 Corona virus I am hearing religious people define "*faith*" in many different ways. One pastor I listened to accused those churches that had cancelled services of not having "*faith*." His argument was that if people trusted God "hard enough," God would protect us from the virus because God has "demanded" that we worship him together on Sundays.
- I might have let "commanded" slip by but "demanded" caught my attention! With regard to "meeting together," what has God actually "demanded" or even "commanded?" I believe you'll find *very sparse* support for any biblical command that we must meet as we are used to meeting in a building in large groups at 10:30 or 11:00 AM on Sundays.
- You folks understand what I am saying here. Maybe someday we'll look at the only passage I think might remotely be a command that even touches on this "gathering" matter, but not this morning.
- If another news story is correct and not slanted, I don't have video this time, another, not quite local, "big dog pastor," has pronounced upon whom the Corona virus is a curse and that if we trust God hard enough and live righteously enough God has promised in the Old Testament we will not get it.
- This is all part of the context in which I am thinking of the "***commended faith***" of an inconsistent human, named Abram and later Abraham.

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

- I been asking if the idea that faith works by a human believing just *really* hard—and faith works even better by a human believing *really, really* hard is the emphasis I see in *Genesis* and in *Hebrews*?
- "**Faith**" is one of those words that we feel we understand what it means as we hear it spoken or read it on a page.
- I mean, after all, *Hebrews 11:1* defines it for us in words that are familiar to many of us, RIGHT? In the NKJV it reads, "**Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.**"
- There! That's what faith is according to the Bible. If I had you pause and look at that verse for a while I bet you might decide it is not quite as straightforward as it feels when it slips off your tongue.
- What is "*substance*" here? This word alone has birthed a whole strand of "*name-it-claim-it*" theology that concludes, just like God Creates in *Genesis 1 & 2*, **our** words make physical realities out of nothing. As you might recall, I don't even think they have what **happened** in *Genesis 1 & 2* correct let alone a theology of faith!
- Are "*things hoped for*" anything I decide I want? Any outcome that seems preferable to me? If I can dream it for myself, I'll get it **BUT**, only if I have *really, really* good faith, the kind that makes human dreams come true.
- If I can scrunch my eyes, and screw up my face in concentrating on believing *really, really* hard and then tap my magic ruby slippers three times, I will get what I want.
- That's biblical faith for some folks. As I read about Abraham's faith, I wonder if some of that theology hasn't gotten into me just a bit. I wonder if I certify my effort to God of *really, really* believing by being a *really, really* scrunching-myself-up-hard in consistently good-living, that that will be my magic shoes moment when my dreams will all

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

come true and I'll go back to Kansas—which, forgive me Kansans, hardly seems like a very good wish to make in the first place.

- Well, OK, maybe the NIV translation of *Hebrews* 11:1-2 clarifies it for us. What does it read? ***"Now, faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."***
- Not all of you, but some of you more like me, will get this. I am not ***sure***, I am not very ***certain***, I am ever absolutely, 100%, without even the slightest shade of a doubt at all ***sure*** and ***certain*** of anything.
- I'll put my *faith* in God and what He says...that God is real and who he says he is, and Jesus Christ is the only way to be right with God and the Bible is God's truth for us to know all of this—I'll put the strength of my faith in these facts from God up against almost anyone's. But, I'm not sure I could swear honestly I never have a single doubt—that I am absolutely always *sure and certain*.
- So the NIV makes me have to dig even harder to ask why they would translate this in terms of "*sure and certain*." Maybe it is just convicting me that my faith is a weak faith about even these basic things but I don't think that's it.
- We may think we understand the word "*faith*" but if the amount of arguing theologians have done about the meaning of the word is any measure, we should pause and ask if we truly do.
- At one time in the history of the church, the time of the Reformation, the meaning and the nature of faith that can *save* a person became a big issue. Put somewhat more simply than it actually was, the Roman Catholic Church could accuse the Reformers that their "*faith without works*" salvation was an empty call to making a mental and maybe a verbal *assent* to some ideas. This meant a person simply said "I believe that" and was now free to sin all they wanted and still go to heaven when they died.

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 **UNEDITED**

- There were strawmen created on both sides of this argument. However, to win the day, Reformed theologians set about to define biblical faith more rigorously and beat those Catholics at their own word game.
- Some of you know the famous three Latin terms the Reformers used. Their definition said real faith has 3 components. Any other faith is false faith—fake belief—dead faith.
- To have *real faith*, the Reformers would say, one has to have **knowledge** of a truth (Jesus died for sinners), **assent** to the truth of that knowledge (I *believe* that truth to be true) and finally, what they called "*fiducia*."
- I can get my free-grace head around the first two, understood correctly, but this third one, I can't. You can hear the word we sometimes use, "fiduciary" in the Latin. The emphasis they were making was that one must *really, really entrust* oneself to this truth and prove that faithfulness by producing visible good works that showed you *really, really* believed.
- This understanding, used to combat the charges of the Roman Catholics, remains with many folks today. For many of them, if they were consistent, they would have to look at an inconsistent Abraham at certain times in his life, and say: "His faith is a *false* faith!" "He doesn't really *believe* God."
- The problem is, **God** said he did and God even "*reckoned*" this inconsistent human's faith for *righteousness*. Then he even commended this guy, who tried to give his wife away to another man not once but twice to save his own skin, in what we call "The Hall of Faith" in *Hebrews* 11. Maybe God thought we would never read the details of Abraham's inconsistent life in *Genesis*??

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

- Maybe we won't find out his human inconsistencies proving his faith was not *really, real* faith??
- So, I don't think the three so-called components of really real faith, whether listed in Latin or just English, help define it. I think they confuse. The reality is none of us *think* this way. None of us *believe* things this way. None of us *have faith* this way. Yet, God shows, like Abraham, we really can believe and we really can have faith.
- Why do you believe or have faith that it is true that there is such a thing as the Covid-19 virus, a novel Corona virus form that originated and passed to humans in some in way in or near "Wu-Han" China and it has now come to our shores and is making thousands of people very ill and killing many people mostly those who are weak and in some way immunocompromised.
- **Why? Do you believe this?** Now you need to be in front of me but you are not so you will just have to play along.
- For example, some of you just love Dr. Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who has been a spokesperson for President Trump in his briefings.
- Why do you have faith in what Dr. Fauci says? Is it because you have seen a Covid-19 virus with your own eyes? Is it because you know someone personally who has this particular viral infection versus the flu or seasonal allergies or a cold? Maybe some of you do but most of us don't know anyone yet.
- Is it because you heard it said as truth, decided to assent to it as truth, and have somehow proven you really believe DR. Fauci hard enough to really, really have faith and prove it by how you are living?
- That might sound like I've just proven the reformers correct. If you *really, really* believe—if you truly have Fauci-faith you will be

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

huddled in your basement alone with guns and gold waiting for August to come out of your safe place.

- However, I just bet even if some of you who truly believe the Corona virus is here have probably still snuck out some and done some living inconsistent with what you truly believe from Dr. Fauci.
- That doesn't mean you don't really believe or you don't have faith. It may mean you are not living in consistency with your really, real faith. Say hello to inconsistent Abraham one more time. He believed, didn't always live like he did and still ended up in Hebrews 11.
- That's almost enough Dr. Fauci, but did you catch one obvious thing I danced around during that whole Fauci illustration?
- If Dr. Fauci has convinced you that the Covid-19 virus you have never seen exists, and that no one you know firsthand has it yet and convinced you it can attack even you, how has he done that? He can't prove it to you. *You have to trust him!*
- You may trust him because he is 78 years old and should know some things—or because he has led an infectious disease institute since the 80's—or because he has degrees and certifications—or because he stands up to President Trump at times—or just because you think he is a cute little old man—BUT the reason you *believe* is because you trust *him* as a source of truth!
- Of course, when he gets some things wrong, like the value of masks, you may trust him less. BTW: Mary is now making fashion masks. Mine has the Detroit Red Wings emblem on it. I'm likely to get "punched in the mask" by some cabin-fevered Avs fan if I wear it.
- Unlike Dr. Fauci, fortunately, the LORD in whom Abraham trusted, and we can trust, He *never* gets things wrong!
- I probably can't resolve to anyone's absolute satisfaction the arguments that have raged for centuries over defining faith. I can tell

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

you *I think* it is clear biblically that believing and having faith are simple human actions that don't hide components that fake us out as to whether or not we *really, really* believe hard enough.

- Granted, we may not believe the *right* truth or have faith in the *right* source of information, but that is not a fake belief on our part. We really do believe. We just believe the wrong thing or person.
- I can tell you for sure this morning something that I think always matters most about our faith always and especially today as folks are questioning faith when you don't do exactly what they do.
- I think it's clear in what comes next in the *Hebrews* context. It is not how hard we *really, really* believe that makes our faith matter—that is what makes it a powerful thing. Biblical faith is not the picture of Dorothy working hard to *really, really* believe.
- It is *in whom* we believe, where we place our faith that makes all the difference. Just as I did last week, I'm going to call you to focus on this similar reality of Biblical faith.
- With whatever apologies might be due to my preacher brothers who are saying if we "believe *hard* enough" and "live *good* enough" God will protect us all from the Corona virus. This is not true anymore than to say God failed to protect the one human who certainly believed without fail and lived without sin from dying on a Roman cross.
- Look at *Hebrews* 11:1-3 again. ***"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."***
- The author of *Hebrews* continues to lay the foundation for the entire chapter on faith by telling us to look at Creation as an example. We

believe the God we are going to trust made the universe by his command. Why do we believe this? Because he told us so AND we believe what he tells us. That is the basic choice we get. Believe God or not.

- The author then lists the names of ancient men who believed what God told them—that is, had faith in God so they had faith in what he said and believed it to be true. Abel, Enoch, Noah and then comes our Abraham in verse 8...

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

¹¹ By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

one and only son, ¹⁸ even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

- By faith, because he trusted the source of the truth, God, Abraham started a journey not knowing the geographical destination not knowing the intended outcome in human terms. His obedience didn't make his faith real. He believed what God said was true and obeyed because he did.
- Human fear might have kept him from acting on his faith in God, and what he believed about what God had told him to do, but obedience or disobedience didn't make what he believed any less or any more true.
- By faith, trusting God and so believing what he had promised, Abraham had a faith-child to fulfill the promise of "countless" offspring. Oh, but wait, Abraham got worried—maybe doubted it would ever happen—decided he knew what the outcome should look like in human terms and, we will see, this resulted in Ishmael a natural human child rather than Isaac a child by faith. Doubting, misunderstanding, failing didn't make God less trustworthy or what Abraham believed less true.
- By faith Abraham is willing to sacrifice—to kill the very child of faith—at God's word. By this point, Abraham's experience of the trustworthiness of God has grown his faith and strengthened his faith to the point that he believes God can even raise Isaac from the dead if that is what it will take to be faithful to his word.
- What had he grown to realize? He had grown to realize faith is not about thinking of outcomes in human terms and then believing *really, really* hard and maybe even clicking the heels of one's ruby

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

red slippers of being a really good person together to make our human dreams—even good sounding dreams come true.

- Abraham came to realize faith was first of all and then ultimately always about who you trusted. He had grown to trust the LORD more and more through the experiences of his long life.
- His growing trust in the LORD didn't change the truth of anything God had said—that is, it didn't make it any "truer." His growing trust did allow him to believe that God could even raise the dead if needed. *One way or another God will accomplish his plan.* Abraham trusted the LORD and believed *this* when he climbed Mt. Moriah to sacrifice Isaac.
- From the sublime illustrations of faith in *The Letter to the Hebrews* to the very mundane illustration that has helped the thinking of a dumb ice hockey player who used to play pond hockey in the winters in Michigan.
- As I stepped out on those frozen ponds in Rouge Park and other places, it did not matter one single bit how *really, really* hard I believed the ice would hold up under my skates. It didn't matter one little bit how good a skater or hockey player I was to make that ice hold me and keep me out of the ice-cold water below.
- All that mattered was the thickness of the ice—the *trustworthiness* of the object of my faith—the trustworthiness of where I was placing my faith to hold me.
- At many points in this sermon I have realized a listener or reader could be confused about what I am trying to say. One reason for that is because we are talking about the inner workings of human thinking and those inner workings are complex. If you pull apart a piece to examine by itself—such as faith—you can end up with distortion and lots of—"but, Raleigh, what if's."

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGJR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

- These days I am trying to make us all think about God's word in more than easy, shallow, pragmatic ways to get us through a crisis, but I still want to be practical and not add to anyone's confusion or tension.
- So, let me tell you, in a very specific way, what I was trying to provoke you to think about in a deeper way in this sermon—and I still hope you will think deeply about it.
- The biblical definition—certainly the biblical focus—of "having faith" right now as we face all the changes and fears brought on by the Corona virus is not what many are preaching and teaching.
- Faith is not, first of all, thinking up the best outcome for me and mine as I can envision it. *"No one I know and love will get sick and die from this. I will not lose my job, my house, my financial security from this. Etc. Etc."*
- Faith is not, then, (and many of us do this sometimes without even realizing we are doing it because of how we view the workings of faith) then *baptizing* my desired outcomes—that is spiritualizing them by saying "**God** has told me, I will not get sick and so on."
- And not then, trying to believe *really, really* hard in my head that what I have now pictured and decided God has told me will come true.
- And not maybe even adding to my *really, really* hard believing—*really, really* hard attempts to be good and let's be honest, these are usually in order to deserve our dreams coming true from God.
- Is it always bad to push away doubts and desire to live righteously? Not at all. It is only that these are not the heart of biblical faith.
- Pardon me again. Biblical faith is focused on the "thickness of the ice" not my "head games" and quid pro quo deals with God.

Series: "Corona, Corona"

Sermon: "Faith: Harder and Harder 'Gooder' and 'Gooder'?"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-19 & Matthew 14:22-36

RGJGR/FBCCS/4-5-20 UNEDITED

- Biblical faith is focused on the trustworthiness of our Creator God who will accomplish his plans as he has promised not necessarily as we picture the desired outcomes we want him to produce for us.
- All those Old Testament guys in *Hebrews 11* had to learn that biblical faith was not about them believing hard enough and being good enough to make God produce the outcomes they wanted here and now.
- Biblical faith was about things they could only make out in a distance—about a “better country”—a “heavenly one not an earthly one.
- This why God was not “ashamed to be the God who is the trusted & trustworthy God of inconsistent and even sinful humans like Abraham.
- The Apostle Peter took his eyes off of Jesus while walking to the Lord on a stormy sea and he began to sink. Many would say, Peter was now drowning because he didn’t believe hard enough.
- But what really happened first? Peter took his eyes off of Jesus and focused elsewhere on the circumstances of this world--on the potential loss of his hoped-for outcome—not drowning.
- The lesson here is not, as many are teaching it to be, that we should never be afraid but just believe harder and we will safe.
- No, the lesson is not believe harder. **The lesson is don’t take our eyes off of Jesus to focus on our own expected outcomes.** That is what will increase our fear and doubt rather than increase our faith in the trustworthy God who never fails to keep his Word—not our baptized dreams, but HIS WORD!