

A Fruitful Form of Blindness

Proper 14C: Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16

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Faith. Maybe you've heard it's an important concept in the New Testament. But it's a word we use in a lot of different ways for a lot of different things, isn't it? It can refer to a sense of trust or confidence in somebody or it can refer to an entire religion. Jesus talked about faith as if it were a superpower. He said if you've got the smallest granule of it you could ask a mulberry tree to jump into the sea or a mountain to move over, and they would do it. He told some people that faith was what healed their bodies, cast out their demons.

But for all the references to what faith looks like and what faith can do, it's in the book of Hebrews that we get a working definition of what faith might actually be. And what faith is, if you'll allow a paraphrase, is a fruitful form of blindness. Or if that overstates it, there is clearly a necessary blindness for faith to emerge. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

We usually understand blindness as a lack. And it's true that, most basically, blindness refers to the absence of one of the five human senses. But anyone who has known a person who is blind understands that people without sight do not necessarily take in or comprehend 20% less of the world. In fact, sometimes the opposite is clearly true.

I dutifully learned Clementi Sonatinas from a pale yellow book as a boy. I can still see the notes my piano teacher, Mrs. Sheets, wrote in the margins in her elegant handwriting with one of her perfectly sharpened pencils. When I was learning those pieces, I'd look up at the music and then down at my hands to find the right keys and then back up at the music to see where my fingers should go next. Maybe I don't need to point out that the way I nodded my head up and down mechanically was basically the opposite of a Stevie Wonder impersonation, who always seemed to be scanning the sky for something else to smile about as his flailing arms sent his fingers to just the right keys at just the right times. Then again, Mrs. Sheets never suggested I play "Superstition" at the spring recital either. So there's that.

I don't want to downplay the challenges of moving through a world that's been arranged for people who can see for someone who cannot. But there are so many examples, in humans and throughout the natural world, of people and creatures that seem to take in this world even more fully and engage it even more powerfully when a capacity like sight is missing.

And I point this out because there's nothing in the teaching of Jesus or the whole of scripture to suggest that faith is the next best thing to seeing clearly how things will turn out. It's not the thing we're forced to be satisfied with since we can't quite reach a state of total certainty. Instead, we're told that faith, which is all about things that are unseen and uncertain, is precisely what Jesus wants to see alive in us. So there really is a blindness that is an essential precondition for this sacred power in our lives.

Think about it. Can you remember a moment in the gospels when Jesus was amazed at what someone saw clearly or understood perfectly or foretold? It was people's faith that captivated him most. It was faith, not sight, that he wanted there to be more of in the world, even in the people whose literal vision returned after a healing encounter with him.

So, back to the book of Hebrews. It was written, as its title suggests, to Jews. Given that, it makes some sense that the case for faith is made by appealing to great characters in Jewish history. To the lives of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob and a lot more if we were to read the whole chapter. And what the writer reminds us is that Abraham, as we just heard, "set out for a place that he was to receive

as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going." Let me say it again. It's not faith if we're not blind. It's not faith if we know where we are going.

What we might assume is that, even if they were in the dark at one point in time, faith was what eventually got the patriarchs all the good things they hoped for. Verse 11 does seem to tie the faith of Abraham and Sarah to the power of procreation once. But that's very much the exception. The point Hebrews 11 keeps driving home is that faith isn't about getting things to work out like you hope they will. Not even if you're a patriarch. "All of these died in faith without having received the promises," we're told, "but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland."

Faith is the stuff we blind strangers and foreigners live by as we search for home. Does anything in that sentence describe you, if not on the surface of your happy and successful life, then deeper down in the more uncertain parts of your heart?

I heard a story the other day in which I don't believe the word faith even occurs but seemed to me like much more than a metaphor for what we read about in Hebrews. It seemed like a wild and powerful instance of life transforming faith.

Darryl Lennox is a comedian who says he spent most of his life distrustful of strangers. He steered clear of them as best he could. Darryl has also had vision problems from the time he was young. He went blind in his left eye more than twenty years ago. In 2018, he became allergic to his glaucoma medication and began to lose sight in his other eye. One night, as he went to bed, he read a text message through a small window of sight in a corner of his seeing eye. And when he woke up the next day that window had closed. Forever.

He felt his way to the bathroom and searched the mirror for some shadow of his face as he turned the light switch on and off, on and off. But there was nothing. So, to keep from falling into terror and despair, he brushed his teeth and made the affirmations he made every morning: "I'm the best of all time. I'm the best comic alive. I'm the funniest [person] on the planet. I'm going to change this world, boom. So let's get to work."

Everything did change for Darryl that day, in ways you and I can at least somewhat imagine. What might not occur to us is that Darryl was suddenly forced to trust people in ways he never had before. He suddenly had to depend on the very strangers he feared and avoided, because he was blind.

One day he accidentally bumped a guy as he sat down at a bar. He apologized but the stranger's agitation and hostility just kept boiling, even after Darryl explained he couldn't see. So he said, "Hey, what's your name? ... Let me buy you a beer."

The guy, who said his name was Bob, began to calm down just a little and said, "So you're really blind? ... What's that like?"

"Well," Darryl says, "I have to trust everybody."

And Bob says, "I would never let that happen. I'm a cop."

"Well, wait. So if I have to trust everybody, you have to wake up and trust nobody?"

"That's exactly right." And then Bob began his confession about how being so vigilantly mistrustful, which he felt was part of his job, was taking its toll. He wasn't sure he could live like this much longer.

It seems like the difference between having to trust everybody and not trusting anybody can be the difference between life and death. And it's the person without the trust who's most in peril.

Don't you think that kind of trust might be akin to the faith in the midst of all we do not know and cannot see that Jesus still hopes to find alive in us and in our world?

Hebrews 11 is a fine chapter to read from on Founder's Day, Calvary's birthday, as we give thanks for our spiritual forbears in this place. This doesn't mean we should overlook their mistakes and their flaws any more than we should overlook our own. But when I think of their faith in terms of Hebrews 11, what I

admire is that they took the hope that you and I might show up one day to say our prayers at the Calvary that they founded. And they used that hope and faith to fuel their action in the present.

But they were also very, very blind. Calvary in 2022 surely looks almost nothing like whatever images they would have carried in their hopeful heads back in 1832. Mary Gloucester must have been a force of nature to mount her horse and ride off to demand that the bishop send a priest to West Tennessee, carrying an infant grandchild and a jug of peach brandy to help make her case, we're told. But even she couldn't have imagined, for one blinding example, a priest named Katherine serving at Calvary's altar. Our founders were mostly blind to who we are and to so much of what Calvary and Memphis would become. But this is just as it should be, just as it must be, because such blindness is the only context in which faith can exist.

It's been said that the opposite of faith isn't doubt. It's certainty. The author of Hebrews would certainly agree. So, can you hear the good news that the uncertainty and blindness we live with are not failures of your faith, but the only context in which the faith Jesus said was such a powerful force for healing can take root? They may also make the space that love and risk and joy and friendship and all sorts of beautiful things need to breathe and come to be.

And can you begin to imagine how our lives might actually open up in new ways, to new people and ideas and possibilities for wholeness, when we accept that we are all of us unseeing strangers and foreigners who have set out on a journey and who do not know where we are going? People who, come to think of it, have no real life-giving choice at all but the fruitful form of blindness called faith.