

Date Preached	07-Aug-2022	Date Initiated	19-Jul-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Prop 14, Yr C

" [F]aith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen. "



Every so often, when I'm rushing to beat the clock (yet again!), I flash back to the Sunday I was confirmed, in ninth grade. I was running *really* late that morning. I'd slept over at my best friend's house the night before. We hadn't gotten much sleep, and by the time I woke up, I had less than an hour to pedal my bike furiously across town; get home, get showered and dressed; and then get over to church.

And I did *not* want to be late! I'd been looking forward to this day for months. In addition to years of Sunday school, I'd also had a year of Monday evening confirmation classes. I don't remember much from that class, but I do recall our spending a *lot* of time on the Apostles' Creed.¹ We'd studied it, line by line. We'd examined its history. We'd discussed and debated and dissected it ... and, finally, we'd memorized it: Each of us could say, by heart, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, **maker**² of heaven and earth. ... " I even knew (or *thought* I knew) what all the words meant: why Jesus "descended into Hell" ... all about the "communion of the saints." And finally the day had arrived: the day to stand before the church and affirm—as an adult (in the eyes of the *Church*, at least!)—the faith my parents had gifted me at my baptism.

But a funny thing happened after I knelt in front of the whole church and Reverend Shires³ laid his hands on me: Nothing. Yes, maybe my family went out to lunch or something, but, in terms of my outlook? ... my identity? ... my *life*? *Nothing* really changed. All that studying and memorizing didn't end up accomplishing a whole lot, it seemed. ↓ It would take me many, many more years—*decades*, actually—to grasp that true faith is not just belief, but also *living* that belief.

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It's not news to any of us, I know, that we live in a fairly **faith-less** world—and not just in terms of dwindling church membership and closing parishes⁴ ... although there *is* that. No, we live in a world in which the very *idea* of faith is under attack. On the one hand, 'realists' say having faith is denial—is anti-science or simply naïve; and 'objectivists' critique religious faith as weak and counter to rugged, winner-take-all individualism.⁵ On the other hand, armies of Christian

¹ This is the 'classical' text of Christian initiation: the creed that, historically, the Church has used to teach newcomers the Church's beliefs and ensure someone who wishes to be baptized (or confirmed) has sufficient knowledge of the faith. This is why the Apostles' Creed, rather than the more-commonly used Nicene, is part of the sacrament of Holy Baptism and also used when we renew our baptismal vows, from time to time.

² The "creator" of today's newer translation (used in Rite Two) would come later.

³ There are no bishops in the Presbyterian Church, so ministers do the confirming!

⁴ I recently heard an estimate that the (Roman Catholic) Diocese of Hartford has either closed or merged more than a quarter of its local parishes in the last six or seven years.

⁵ In a 1964 interview, Ayn Rand said, "Christ, in terms of the Christian philosophy, is the human ideal. He personifies that which men [*sic*] should strive to emulate. Yet, according to the Christian mythology, he died on the cross not for his own sins but for the sins of the nonideal people. In other words, a man of perfect virtue was sacrificed for men who are vicious and who are expected or supposed to accept that sacrifice. If I were a Christian, nothing could make me more indignant than that: the notion of sacrificing the ideal to the nonideal, or virtue to vice. And it is in the name of that symbol that men

extremists now roving this land increasingly model a faith that's some unholy marriage of cramped morals and brute force.

Because of all this opposition and bad press, we who count ourselves—and happily!—among the Church's faithful spend a lot of energy explaining *what* we believe and *why* we believe it. This has, I fear, unwittingly trapped us in the same corner I was in forty-some years ago, as I pedaled like mad to recite the Apostles' Creed from memory: Spending so much time on the *words* and *ideas* of faith ... that we never get to what *living* faithfully looks like, in real-life.

- We try to explain what happens here [*gesture*] each week to neighbors who can't understand why we won't accept a Sunday morning invitation ... but how often do we reflect on the **maximal holiness** of Christ that we encounter, time after time, at [*gesture*] this rail, bathing our souls in grace?
- We bob-and-weave to parry the arguments of colleagues or club members who ask, "If Jesus really *was*⁶ the Son of God, then how come ... DOT, DOT, DOT ... ?" ... without pausing to consider how, at least on *some* mornings, the hope we have in Him may be the only thing that gets us out of bed.
- We drink tea and hold hands with the bereaved friend who's suffered a shattering loss, searching in vain for vaguely Jesus-y bromides that will stanch the flow of her grief ... but do also we pray—right there, in the moment—for the Holy Spirit to descend and comfort her?

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What I missed as a confirmand clinging to my creed ... and what we *all* miss in our tangled explanations and well-meaning, if watery, words of comfort ... is that words and ideas are only the *starting-point* of our faith in Christ. True faith ... deep faith ... faith that changes us and re-orientes our lives ... is, as we hear St Paul say today, "the assurance"—the visceral knowledge—"of things hoped for" ... and "the conviction"—the unshakeable certainty—"of things not seen."⁷ Faith is the confidence—the *lived* confidence—that everything Jesus said and did really *is* true ... for us ... right here ... right now:

- Faith is the existential confidence that Jesus really *is* God Incarnate: that when He chose to take on human form, He suffused our humanity with God's divinity, indelibly and forever ... such that you and I and everyone else we encounter really *is*, at the center of our souls, the image of God: worthy of dignity, honor and celebration.
- Faith is the bedrock confidence that, on the Cross, Jesus really *did* work the forgiveness of all our sins: that nothing, whether in our DNA or our dispositions or our deeds—nothing!—can ever deprive us of even an *iota* of God's total love and infinite grace ... such that however horribly we have behaved—however grievous the injuries we may

are asked to sacrifice themselves for their inferiors. That is precisely how the symbolism is used." (<https://courses.aynrand.org/lexicon/religion/>)

⁶ I intentionally (incorrectly) use the past tense here to convey the skeptic's conception that Jesus was merely a mortal, if charismatic, human being.

⁷ In the Greek, the words Paul uses that our translation renders as "assurance" and "conviction" carry the connotations of "reality" and "evidence," respectively. That is, faith is the *existence*—the *being*, here and now—of these things.

have inflicted—God has gone exactly nowhere from us.

- Faith is the always-fresh confidence that, on account of Jesus' Resurrection, we have *already been reborn* into the eternal lives He promised us: that regardless of how ugly or divided or violent this world may be (or become), this life really *is* our one-way-and-forever passage to Christ's throne in paradise ... such that every challenge ... every calamity ... indeed, every death ... is also another step closer to that heavenly city God has prepared for us.

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Abraham had no scripture; Abraham had no Church; and above all, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, Abraham had no Jesus. But Abraham had *faith*: Not a wordy, intellectual, doctrinally sound creed-faith ... but a deep-seated conviction ... an unshakeable assurance ... that God was calling and leading and equipping him. ¶With his family looking on in sorrow and dismay, Abraham left his ancestral homeland for good, because he had faith. ¶With a strange, wary new people surrounding him, Abraham made a new home in Canaan, because he had faith. ¶With incredulity in their hearts, Abraham and Sarah had a first child in their very old age, because they had faith. In faith, they never ceased walking onward, toward the heavenly city God prepared for them.

So, let us be inspired by Abraham and Sarah. Let us, too, keep walking in our faith—in our faith in Jesus, Who *is* the heavenly city God has prepared for us. Let us walk from creed, to conviction. Let us walk from words, to deeds. Let us walk from belief, to *assurance*: the *blessed* assurance that we *are* "filled with His goodness and lost in His love."⁸



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⁸ From the hymn "Blessed Assurance," LEVAS 184