

SERMON TITLE: "The Perfect Pioneer"

TEXT: Hebrews 11:1-12:3

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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THE DUMP TRUCK AND THE FAITH BOX

There is a question—or at least a *variation* of a question—that I have heard a lot over the course of my life.

I heard it when I was a small boy sitting in a rural Mennonite church full of imposing and intimidating looking old men in dark suits who never seemed to smile.

I heard versions of it in missionary reports from people I didn't recognize who had been to places I had never heard of.

I heard it in youth group, at various retreats and concerts. I heard it in Sunday morning services and at worship concerts when I was a young adult.

I heard it in Bible College classrooms and on religious radio programs that I listened to while sitting in a tractor on the family farm. I read about it in books and articles.

It was a question that seemed, to a young boy and a young man, to be the most important question that I could ever face but the one that I was also least able to answer in a satisfactory way.

The question?

When did you come to faith?

Now perhaps that seems just a bit anti-climactic to you, given my drawn-out, suspense-laden introduction! And you're probably right, because this is not, by any means, a bad or controversial or suspicious or theologically loaded question. In fact, it's a pretty ordinary one that could be taken in a number of different ways.

It could mean:

- Tell me a bit about your faith journey
- What has your experience of faith been like?
- How has God shown himself to you—where you have seen and heard and experienced his voice and his guiding presence."

It could mean any of these or other things.

But none of these very appropriate and healthy things that you would expect to be a normal part of life in a Christian community are what I *heard* (there is often a **big** difference between what is said and what we hear, isn't there?).

What I *heard* was: "Describe for me the moment that you *obtained* faith." When did you get it?

Perhaps a couple of images will help to illustrate this view of faith.

In my understanding, everyone was kind of like an empty dump truck. We all began driving through life with our boxes empty. But they weren't meant to be empty! God had set things up so that there was a box that fit perfectly in the back of our trucks.

The thing that fit that spot—the thing that saved us and guaranteed eternity with Jesus—was "faith." Once we "came to" faith, we simply deposited the "faith box" in the back of our trucks, and we were good to go. The faith box contained all the stuff that we needed to go to heaven and it all came at once.

What was in the box? ANSWERS! Answers to all of the big questions in life were settled. Questions like:

- Does God exist?
- Did Jesus rise from the dead?
- Is Christianity the only way?
- How do we know that we are right?
- Which church is the right one?
- How does a good God allow suffering and evil?
- All kinds of other questions that have exercised great minds throughout history

In short, "faith" was a box that involved thinking and believing the correct things about God and what he expected his people to think and do.

Some people seemed to be born with the faith box. Faith in Christ seemed to simply be a default position—almost as if they emerged from the womb reciting the Lord's Prayer and singing How Great Thou Art. Faith was just something that they *had*; it would have made no more sense to ask them when they came to faith than to ask them when they came to have green eyes.

Others had very specific moments where they came to faith. Often there was some personal crisis or dramatic story that was part of this moment. Faith appeared as the exclamation point at the end of a long sentence that had involved a good deal of struggle.

Whether you were born with faith, or it came to you later in life, faith was something that you just got. And it all came at once. You came to it, received it, and then moved on with life.

Once the “faith box” was in the back of your truck, you didn’t have to wonder about anything anymore—and in fact were sometimes even *discouraged* from wondering too much—because the answers to all those questions were inside the box! You were home free.

You had faith.

FAITH

Well, I don’t know if this is a story that resonates with many (or any!) of you or not. It is one of those stories that tend to get better with each retelling. But it is one that reflects part of my own wrestling with what faith is.

I think the question of how we understand faith is an important one. It is the question that I have spent a good chunk of my adult life investigating and exploring, but it is a question for all of us, whether we are inclined or called to devote years of study to it or not. We all need to understand what faith is what it asks of us.

So, what is faith? Perhaps this is a question that seems obvious, but there are almost as many answers to this question as there all people!

During my time at Regent College I did a fair amount of research on faith and atheism and came across some interesting definitions of faith.

From American philosopher and prominent atheist Daniel Dennett:

Faith is "unreasonable certainty that you have all the answers."

From British biologist and even more prominent atheist Richard Dawkins:

Faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate."

How about an example from pop culture? Here’s one from singer-songwriter Jakob Dylan in a song called “Everybody’s Hurting”:

Faith is believing what you see ain’t so.

American journalist Christopher Hitchens makes it easy:

Faith is grounded in wishful thinking.

This doesn't sound very good so far. Faith doesn't have a very good name in our world.

HEROES OF FAITH

Our text this morning has a lot to say about faith. I think it offers us a better understanding of faith than the folks I just quoted as well as the one I operated with as a kid.

We are in the book of Hebrews—a book written to a persecuted church of Jewish people in the Greek culture of the Roman Empire. Some have speculated that the letter to the Hebrews might be addressed to a house church in Rome? We're not sure.

We don't know *who* wrote the book of Hebrews, but we do know that it was written roughly between 50 – 90 A.D (a generation or so after Jesus' death and resurrection) to encourage a group of Christians to persevere in their faith.

It is a letter but reads more like a long sermon or an extended exhortation. It is among the most sophisticated of all the letters in the NT as far as style and argumentation go.

And Hebrews has a lot to say about faith—particularly in the passages we will be focusing on today.

If you have your bibles you will notice that this is a large passage of Scripture and we can't read it all. But we will read portions of it (I encourage you to read it throughout the week). It starts with another definition of faith:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

What proceeds, for the rest of chapter 11, is a retelling of the stories of some of these heroes of Israel's history. It is a kind of "honour roll of faith."

It has an almost poetic structure to it, with a whole number of "by faiths" followed by the stories of the Old Testament saints.

- *By faith* Abel brought God a better offering than Cain (11:4)
- *By faith* Noah built an ark (11:7)
- *By faith* Abraham left his home even though he didn't know where he was going (11: 8-12)
- *By faith* Abraham offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice (11:17-19)
- *By faith* Moses' parents hid him from the Egyptians (11:23)
- *By faith* Moses chose to be mistreated along with the Israelites and led his people out of Egypt (11:27-29)

- *By faith* the Israelites conquered the city of Jericho into the promised land (11:30)
- *By faith* Rahab harboured spies in Jericho (11:31)

That's just a snapshot. The writer goes on to tell us that he doesn't have time to mention all of the other people who did amazing things for God. But we get the idea. Faith has been a crucial part of how God's story has moved along throughout history.

There are many things we could learn about faith from this passage in Hebrews, but I want to focus on just a few.

STORYTELLING

The first thing that I think is worth paying attention to is the approach that the writer to the Hebrews takes.

Remember, he is writing to a group of people who probably feel isolated and marginalized, possibly even forgotten. They are probably disappointed that God's kingdom has not yet come—they expected a quick resolution, but it's not happening. Some are likely even abandoning the community or even the faith.

So, what to do... What would we do? What would I do?

Perhaps I would craft an argument from **history**, showing how this or that piece of evidence shows that Jesus really did say and do this or that, that the crucifixion and resurrection really did happen, that this or that person saw Jesus, etc.

Or, perhaps a **logical** argument would be best. Nothing like a good old dense and weighty argument from philosophical or theological first principles to whip people back into shape, after all! Give them a blast of apologetics! Attempt to prove the existence of God, the nature of Christ, and a whole host of other important doctrines.

Or maybe an argument from **personal experience** would do the trick. I could talk about visions and dreams and intuitions—times when God just seemed *so real*. Talk about the blessings that come about when we believe in and follow God. After all, nothing works like a personal testimony, right?

Or maybe I could use some combination of all of the above. Put it all together in a compelling package with a nice little ribbon on top and hand it to the church that is struggling. That ought to do the trick, right?

The interesting thing is that the writer to the Hebrews doesn't take this approach. What does he do?

He tells a story.

He tells a story about *real people* who have walked with God. Real people who have followed, who have made real decisions to do real things.

I think the writer knows that logic and philosophy and history and spiritual experience are all good, to a point. But it is stories that move us—*especially* stories about people on the same journey as us.

ORDINARY HEROES

The second thing that is important to notice in this passage is that each and every one of these heroes was a real human being who made real mistakes and experienced real doubts on their journeys of faith.

Abraham *did* leave his land and he *did* follow God into the unknown. But he had his moments of doubt as well. Rather than waiting for God, he took matters into his own hands when he and Sara continued to be childless into their old age. He decided that since kids didn't seem to be coming from Sara, he would use his Egyptian slave Hagar.

Moses was a pillar of faith in leading his people out of slavery in Egypt, but he took a *lot* of convincing to get started, didn't he (send Aaron!)? And Moses felt quite free to argue and plead with God, even changing God's mind at one point about destroying the Israelites for their idolatry (Exodus 32-33)!

The mysterious story about why Moses didn't get to enter the Promised Land also points to a lack of trust in the God who led him. In Deuteronomy 32:51 Moses is even described as "breaking faith" with the Lord.

We could go on... Samson and David each took significant detours in their journeys of faith—times where they did not follow as they ought to have.

The honour roll of Hebrews 11 is not meant to hold up to us perfect examples of people who always thought and did the right things about God.

It is meant to show us an example of people who were ***determined to follow.***

It is meant to tell us the stories of people who were sure of what they hoped for. People who were convinced that the God they could not see was the only one who could meet their deepest need.

Okay, but...

In Hebrews 11:6 it says this: "Without faith it is impossible to please God."

This sounds harsh, but in I think we need to interpret this in light of the stories of Hebrews 11.

It is not saying, “without the faith box in the back of your dump truck—the box that contains all the right doctrines and beliefs and behaviours and certainties and answers in it to get you into heaven—it is impossible to please God.” None of the people in Hebrews 11 would make the grade if this were true.

So what is it saying?

A COMPASS AND A GUIDE

Well, I’m going to give you another picture as a way of answering—a picture that I have come to adopt as a way of looking at faith that is much healthier and biblical than the “dump truck” picture I had for part of my life.

It is a compass. What do compasses do? I’m no navigator, but as I understand these devices they do at least two things.

1. They help to orient us (where are we in relation to x, y, z?). They give us an idea where we are
2. They point us in the right direction.

This is what faith is. Faith locates us and points us in the right direction. It locates us as people who cannot save ourselves, people who are finite and fallen and who don’t know enough and who can’t do enough to meet our deepest need. Faith acknowledges that we are not the centre of the universe and that we are *dependent* creatures.

Faith also points us in the right direction. It gives us something (or someone) to follow.

We can’t just pick any old direction or journey and think that this is enough. Sometimes you hear that as long as you have faith in *something*, that’s the main thing. This is a popular idea.

The writer to the Hebrews will have none of that. The vision that animates the entire letter is a vision of Jesus Christ.

It’s not just a story of people who had faith in *something*. The faith has a goal. The stories are meant to inspire and convict us, to give us strength and hope that we can do it too. But they are also meant to remind us of the direction that all these stories were oriented toward.

Way back in chapter 1, the book of Hebrews begins this way:

¹ *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,* ² *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.* ³ *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*

That's pretty clear language. God has spoken definitively in these last days through Jesus Christ. Jesus is where all things are going (the heir of all things) and he is the source of all things (through whom he made the universe). Jesus is the exact representation of God. That is an amazing picture! We need to understand this and believe that God, in Christ, is telling the truth about who he is, who we are, and how the two are related.

Jesus is our true north. Listen to how he is described in Hebrews 12:2:

*And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, **the pioneer and perfecter of faith.***

Some translations substitute "pioneer" for "author." I like both. "Author" gives us the image of a story and of a person who is telling and guiding the story along. "Pioneer" gives us the picture of someone who is blazing the trail ahead of us.

It *matters* that we get our true north right. It matters that we are journeying in the right direction and toward the proper destination.

But we do not get everything right along the way and we never will. **Nobody** has or has ever had a "faith box" like the one I imagined was necessary in my childhood.

All of us get some things wrong; all of our theologies have errors. It couldn't be otherwise, because we are human beings who only ever see in part.

- Story of theology professor describing the Trinity: I dunno.

Sometimes "I don't know" is the most theologically profound answer we can give!

Hebrews 11 reminds us twice—in 11:13-16 and 11:39-40—that each and every one of these heroes of faith continued to follow on the journey, *despite never seeing the end goal!* This is important. There will always be things we don't see, things we don't know, things we don't understand on our journey of faith.

One of the things I like about the picture of the compass is that the compass is not the only thing in the picture! What else do you see?

- A map
- And someone *studying* it

God expects us to study the map (Scripture)! Having or following a compass isn't the end of the story. There is still work for us to do, things for us to learn, on the journey of faith!

There is adventure and uncertainty and surprise and, maybe even a bit of confusion and uncertainty at times, that will be part of the journey of faith. There was for Abraham, there was for Moses, there was for every other person who has walked the journey of faith.

That's just the nature of the journey. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7).

And it's why we need a guide to continually lead us on, correcting us when we get off course, shining the light when we find ourselves in dark and unfamiliar places.

It's why we need a community of faith to help us on the journey—a community of faith that stretches across space and time. It is why we have the faith and example of others to lean on, whether it is Abraham or Moses or a family member who has walked the journey before us.

TWO APPLICATIONS

So what is the writer to the Hebrews saying to us? Well, I think there are at least two kinds of people or approaches to faith that this passage speaks to. Perhaps there are some from each category here this morning.

1. To those whose view of faith has often resembled the dump truck with the faith box in the back, the message is to see that faith has always been about the journey. Faith is not about conjuring up enough certainty in the things we believe, or about making sure enough things are in our boxes, but *about trusting the one who is leading us*. It's OK to wonder about things, it's OK to ask questions. It's OK to say "I don't know" or "I don't understand." The first Christians were called "People of the way" not "people of the doctrine" or "people of the faith box."
2. To those whose view of faith looks very much like a journey approach, but the journey is fairly open-ended and poorly defined, the call is to fix your eyes on Jesus. It's not just about being on a "spiritual journey" or having faith in *something*. It's about following our pioneer—the one who suffered and died and rose for us so that we could make our journey with confidence.

To be honest, sometimes the dump truck and the faith box seem pretty appealing to me. Things would be so simple and straightforward. All of the nasty and troubling questions are taken care of. No ambiguity or pain or uncertainty. Everything makes sense.

But, there's also not a lot of need for trust. If there was such a thing as a "faith box" I think we would be tempted to rely on our boxes rather than our guide. It would be tempting to think of faith as something we owned or possessed—just like I thought when I was a kid—rather than a journey.

I think the map and the compass and the guide are better.

Because the most important thing that Hebrews reminds us of is that our guide—our pioneer and our author—is also our destination.

And if we get our true north right, and if we decide daily to do our best to learn and grow and listen and look at the map and listen to Jesus and the community of saints, and to follow Jesus on whatever paths he leads, then we DO have faith.

And we have a faith that pleases God.

Amen.

