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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Genesis 15:1-6, Psalm 33:12-22, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, Luke 12:32-40  
God's Peculiar People

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Epistle Reading, from Hebrews Chapter 11. It is this lovely definition of faith:

<sup>1</sup>Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1, NRSV)

This is a modern translation, from the New Revised Standard Version.

I also like the old King James Version. In fact, it somehow seems even more robust to me:

<sup>1</sup>Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1, KJV)

That word “substance” — the “*substance* of things hoped for” — suggests “hard reality.” Faith does not deal with dreams or wishes or predictions, but with the way things really are. Faith deals with substance.

But both translations are fine, and both end with the same phrase: “things not seen.” This is the central idea. Faith concerns things “not seen.” It counts these things “not seen” as being real.

## **COUNT ME AMONG THEM**

And so it is that among the people of earth, there are some people who go around believing in things that are *unseen*. By God's grace, count me among them. Count me among those who believe in things “not seen.”

I have faith in all kinds of things that are not seen. And I do believe that life would be poorer for me and for folks around me if I did not believe in those unseen things:

For example, I believe in the Communion of Saints, including the nearness at hand right here and now of my own dear mother and father. I believe they rest with Jesus. But I believe that Jesus is here in our church, and so with the eyes of faith, I see my mother and father kneeling elbow to elbow with each other and with us at the Communion Table. They were awfully good people. I am grateful for them and I believe in their eternal life, for they entrusted

themselves to Jesus. I do not see Mom and Dad, but I believe in them, because I believe in Jesus.

You might believe the same thing for people now departed but who are dear to you. I hope you do believe in these “unseen things.”

I believe in the Communion of Saints so much that it affects my ministry. This is part of what makes Immanuel Lutheran Church distinctive within the Lutheran churches of Manhattan, in my opinion. I have tried to teach the same lesson to every seminarian I have had a chance to shape: When you step to this sacred desk, be mindful of the Communion of Saints. Be mindful that your sermon is being heard not only by the present congregation, but also by those saints who now rest in the nearer presence of the Lord. So I try to preach in a way that is acceptable to Saint Paul and Saint Augustine and to Martin Luther and to John Wesley and to Pastor Raymond Schulze now of blessed memory. So, I gladly join the church’s ancient confession, “I believe in... the communion of saints.”

Again, I believe in lots of *things unseen*. I believe in love, for example. Biochemists and geneticists and scientists of every stripe might be confident that they can explain humanity down to the final detail, to the very last jot and tittle. But I believe they will never account for the love of a parent for a child or a husband and wife for one another.

I believe in patriotism, in charity, in justice that simply is different from any notion of survival of the fittest.

I believe in music. I believe that a computer could generate notes for ten thousand years and never create a composition like Bach or Neil Young could create when they get up sleepy-headed from bed and grab a pen.

And even if I am wrong or confused about all these other things — about the communion of saints, about love, about music — still I believe in the chief theme of this morning’s Gospel Lesson: I believe that Jesus is coming again. I believe this so thoroughly that I want to be ready for him, and my life’s work is that *you* should be ready for him too:

<sup>39</sup>“But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>40</sup>You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” (Luke 12:39-40, RSV)

No sterile, parched, hopeless, despairing world for me! I believe in lots of things that I cannot see. I am not ashamed to say that I am a man of faith, and I pray to be an even better man of faith going forward.

## ABRAHAM

This means that I hope to walk in the path of one of the Bible's great heroes of faith: Abraham. Our text from Hebrews 11 discusses Abraham, who is sometimes called the "Father of Faith." The man believed in "things unseen." He believed in them more than he believed in the present world surrounding him. He was willing to live and die for those things unseen. I bet Abraham's neighbors felt that the man must have been a dreamer. No sensible mother or father would want their daughter to marry a man who so consistently believed in things that he did not see. It was as if the eyes of the man were forever passing by what *is* and always searching for what was *to be*.

Bobby Kennedy had a famous saying along these lines, but his saying was a bit different from that of Abraham. The Bobby Kennedy saying goes this way:

There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why... I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?

To my ears, that saying was always a nice and optimistic one. It amounts to encouraging folks to give it a try. If they have some idea about how to make the world better, well, go for it. Why not? Why can't we make dreams come true?

But Abraham's vision is different from this saying of Kennedy. Kennedy was speaking of a "dream." "I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?"

But Abraham was not concerned with dreams. He was concerned with the future—with what he was convinced was going to happen in the future. And he had a good reason for his convictions about the future: He expected specific and concrete things in the future for the simple reason that God had said so. The promises of God were the most real of all things for Abraham. Compared to the promised future, the present was insubstantial and fading away.

I hope Abraham had a good deal of joy in his present life. I hope he had moving experiences and gifts that he cherished. But for all that—for both the joys and the sorrows of his present life—Abraham was living and waiting above all for the future the Lord had promised him. Abraham lived in the present, same as everyone else, but he lived with his eye on the future. He lived, that is, according to what "cannot be seen."

Let me give you three examples of Abraham's belief in the future.<sup>1</sup> First, we have Abraham's willingness to leave his homeland in search of the Promised Land. His homeland there in Mesopotamia was probably fine, with many sights

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<sup>1</sup> *The Lectionary Commentary: The Second Readings* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 509.

to which his eyes were accustomed. But Abraham was all eyes for a land that he *could not see*. That is what faith is: it is the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*.” And because he took the Promised Land to be true and real, he set off for it.

Second, we have Abraham’s dwelling in Canaan as an illegal immigrant. In one sense, he had reached the Promised Land: His body was there in the place. But in another sense, he had not reached the Promised Land, for this is not what the Lord had promised! The Lord had not promised that he would dwell in tents, but that he would inherit the Promised Land and have descendants as plentiful as the stars in the sky. But for a long time, this did not happen. Our text describes Abraham’s situation this way:

...he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as  
in a foreign land, living in tents. (Hebrews 11:9, NRSV)

Abraham’s faith is shown in the fact that he stayed. He did not look around and mutter to himself, “This is impossible! I am out of here. I am going back home.” Rather he stayed with his eyes searching ahead for what had really been promised him: that he would inherit the land and have descendants as plentiful as the stars of the sky. Our text puts it this way:

<sup>10</sup>For he looked forward to the city that has foundations,  
whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:10,  
NRSV)

He took this city whose architect and builder is God as being more real, more worth living for, than the present world he could see with his eyes.

And third, there was Abraham’s continuing belief in all those kids and grandkids even though he was old and worn out and his wife Sarah was barren and past the age of conceiving children. With his eyes, he could see no kids or grandkids. But with the eyes of faith, he saw lots of them, more numerous than the grains of sand on the seashore. He believed in those kids and grandkids, though he did not see them. Why? Because the Lord had said so. He did not believe in those kids and grandkids as an old man’s delusion or wild dream or wish fulfillment. He believed in them because the Lord said so, and hang whatever present reality said. And that was his faith. That is why we call Abraham the father of faith: for him, the most real things of all are the things that God has promised.

## THE HEBREWS

Scholars say that the Letter to the Hebrews was written to persecuted and discouraged Christians living in Rome. They might have been Jewish Christians. Probably they were, since many of the early Christians were Jews and since the tone of the letter suggests that it is meant for Christians trained in the scriptures and faith of Israel. Apparently these Christians in Rome were tempted to give up their Christian faith and return to the synagogue.

But the Letter to the Hebrews does not want them to do that. They *cannot* rationally do that. Why? Because of the promise we read in today's Gospel Lesson:

<sup>40</sup>You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Luke 12:40, RSV)

The Letter to the Hebrews wants them to be faithful as Abraham was faithful. He wants them to place more stock in the promises of God than in their present reality.

## WHAT ELSE THEY CANNOT DO

Let me tell you what else they cannot do. Nor can we: They cannot, for example, steal iPhones! Someone stole my son Sam's new iPhone recently. That's why this is on my mind. No, Christians can't go around stealing iPhones. In fact, they can't steal anything. It is not rational to do so. Because Jesus is coming again and then they will be stuck. They will be thieves standing there before Jesus.

Again, Christians cannot cheat on their spouse. Why? Because Jesus is coming again, and Christians count that as being more certain than the pleasures and lures of immorality would be.

Again, Christians cannot be greedy and hardhearted toward their neighbors. Why? Because they take it to be a settled matter that their future includes the One who calls "thou fool" the one...

...who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:21, RSV)

## A PECULIAR PEOPLE

The King James Version of the Bible uses an interesting phrase to describe the people of God. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Lord's people are called a "peculiar people." Yes, that's who we are: a peculiar people.

For example, in Deuteronomy 14, the Lord forbids the Israelites to do things that smell of Baal worship, like cutting themselves. The Israelites are not to go around cutting themselves. Why? Because they belong not just to themselves, but even more to the Lord, who says this:

<sup>2</sup>for thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a *peculiar people* unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth.  
(Deuteronomy 14:2, KJV)

In the New Testament, the apostles claim the same thing for the Church. We are a "peculiar people." For example, in his letter to Titus, Saint Paul describes the self-sacrifice of our Lord Jesus:

<sup>14</sup>Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a *peculiar people*, zealous of good works. (Titus 2:14, KJV)

Also, there is a verse from First Peter that we quote at every Baptism. It talks about the new status of the one who has just been baptized:

<sup>9</sup>But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a *peculiar people*; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: (1 Peter 2:9, KJV)

So, this is the verse we quote—except that we quote it in a modern version, and all the modern versions I know drop that interesting phrase "peculiar people." Thus, in our baptisms, we say this to the one who has just been baptized:

Remember the words of St. Peter: You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, *God's own people*, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

I understand this shift away from the phrase “peculiar people.” It reflects the fact that language shifts and some fine old meanings fade away. The word “peculiar” means “strange or odd.” That’s the meaning we are used to. But it also means “distinct from all others.”<sup>2</sup> The modern versions try to capture this sense of distinctness by using the words “God’s own people.” So, instead of saying to the baptized, you are a “peculiar people,” we now say you are “God’s own people.”

Fine. Fair enough. Language shifts and sometimes becomes archaic. But in this sermon, I have wanted to return to the old phrase and to say about us Christians that we are and ought to be a “peculiar people.” And I mean “peculiar” in the modern sense. I mean that Christians should be a bit of an odd people on earth. The world looking on at Christians should be a bit puzzled by us, as if we are operating according to some new principle of things. For we are! We are a people on earth who live according to a different notion of reality. This different notion of reality has something to do with our loyalty to things we “cannot see.”

<sup>1</sup>Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*. (Hebrews 11:1, NRSV)

Indeed, we are willing to risk our lives on things that we cannot see—that no eyeglasses, no telescope, no microscope can perceive. At least not yet. Someday the things we believe in will indeed be seen. But for now, they cannot be seen. Or rather, if they are seen, it is through what can be called the “eyes of faith.”

Faith requires a restless soul – a soul that longs for the promises of God, a soul that hangs loose from this present world’s ways and temptations, and instead tries to run alongside our Lord Jesus, who taught us to lay up treasure for ourselves not on earth, but in heaven, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/peculiar>