

All the Things
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Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

I could start this morning talking about all the things from which I am hoping in God to bring about good. Our personal ailing, our national ailing, our global ailing. But you can make your own list and me giving you one just feels redundant. The point of Joan S. Gray’s book, quoted on your bulletin cover as “To say that God works for good in all things is to say that nothing can keep God’s will from being done in and among us,”¹ is not to address the myriad difficult things in this world but to address the ones which we touch, and which touch us.

As a book on spiritual leadership for church officers, what she writes is for people who are trying to discern their role in the church, particularly in their own local church. She

¹ Joan S. Gray, *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2009); p. 116.

writes for people who have been elected leaders but who might be wondering if the voters knew what they were doing – people who aren't so sure that they are up for being a leader in God's community, people who might hold back acting for fear of doing the wrong thing or saying the wrong thing, people who see themselves in the prayer of confession which admits to having left undone those things which we ought to have done and having done those things which we ought not to have done.² To be faced with the responsibilities of leadership can understandably be quite paralyzing.

I'm not going to reassure you quite yet for the truth is any of us who take the lead at some time or another **will** say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing or not do or say something we should. A quick start of a Google search on “things not to say to a person with...” brings up options including “depression, anxiety, ptsd, cancer, autism.”³ We are fully aware that we are going to / did / will again say and do things in a less-than-ideal way. This fear is often what stops people from reaching out to friends, family, co-workers, and classmates who are experiencing job loss, divorce, illness, grief – a fear of somehow making it worse by doing something wrong.

Here's where the reassurance comes in. Far greater than helpful internet searches (which definitely have value) is this: “nothing can keep God's will from being done in and among us.” This is, of course, not an endorsement to not try but an encouragement **to** try. Learn about ways to talk about race, with one another, with people whose melanin level is different than yours. Learn about the appreciated language in the LGBTQ community, respectful pronouns, out-of-date descriptions and descriptions that are appreciated today but may not be in a month (so you need to keep learning). Learn what is comforting and what is not to someone facing a cancer diagnosis and someone living into a cancer diagnosis and even someone dying from a cancer diagnosis.⁴ Learn what to say to people who are struggling with, and living fully with, mental illness. And then have faith that God pieces

² *Book of Common Worship*, p. 87.

³ Google search at 1:58 PM on August 6, 2016.

⁴ Like http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nikhil-joshi/10-things-to-not-say_b_5296916.html or <http://www.prevention.com/sex/cancer-support> (not really about sex, I promise) and DEFINITELY this: <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/07/opinion/la-oe-0407-silk-ring-theory-20130407> and then go and buy something from here: <http://emilymcowell.com/collections/cards/Empathy-Cards>

together our human failings and fills the seams with God's goodness. Have faith that the stuff you don't know is not enough to hold God back from doing great things.

Our reading from Hebrews lifts up someone who did this, and well – Abraham. We read: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.” He had faith that the stuff he didn't know was not enough to hold God back from doing great things. The author of our letter writes, too, that Abraham “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Abraham was looking forward to see what good God was bringing. I've spoken with many who have been able to look back and see what God was doing and will state that God's plan was better. It's more of a challenge to look ahead and say confidently that God's yet-to-unfold plan is better than what we have in mind right now. Abraham is our role model today as much as he was for the people first receiving this letter.

The portion of the letter we read opens with what I think is one of the most beautiful sentences, one that gives me a soaring feeling when I read it. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In it I hear a distant ancestor of Emily Dickinson's: “Hope is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul, / And sings the tune without the words, / And never stops at all...”⁵ I mentioned that it is a challenge to look ahead and say confidently that God's yet-to-unfold plan is better than what we have in mind right now and I bring it up again because we could easily conclude that if “faith is the assurance of things hoped for,” then our heart's desires will be fulfilled.

I'm sure you've heard a cautionary tale cloaked in the story of a wish-granting genie – invariably, the wisher finds that he or she didn't count on everything that would come with the wish and the genie delivers a comeuppance for the wisher's (often) greed. God is no genie, which means here that God does not seek to trap us in those things we hope for. God simply still works good in ways that aren't always, maybe ever, the way we imagined or dreamed. The same was true for Abraham who we read was setting “out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.” Abraham never actually owned the land in question; his

⁵ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/hope-thing-feathers-254>

later heirs would go on to own the land. Yet he was not forlorn. Professor Marty Soards suggests “Abraham looks beyond the temporal binding of his life to the full reality of God and the fulfillment of God’s promises.”⁶ A complement to this are the words of Rabbi Tarfon, who wrote, “It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either.”⁷ God completes what God sets out to complete, working with whatever we bring, to create the greatest good. To repeat Joan Gray, “To say that God works for good in all things is to say that nothing can keep God’s will from being done in and among us.” So go; say and do and leave undone and unsaid, assured of what is to come through God.

Let us pray: Great God, receive what we have to offer toward the goodness of your will, we pray. Amen.

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, p. 333.

⁷ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/pirkei_avot.html