



The Westminster Pulpit

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

“Now Faith” **Sermon on Hebrews 11:1**

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August 10, 2025
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

We will soon be participating in the sacrament of baptism, and all of us will be asked about raising these children in the faith. What is faith? I chose to narrow the lectionary text down this morning to one verse. It's printed on the front cover of your bulletin. Let's read it together, out loud.

Hebrews 1:1

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

I'd like for those words to settle in for a moment.

We will be raising our children in the faith.

Part of our calling is to teach our children about the “Things” - the “Things” hoped for, the “Things” to have conviction about. What are those Things?

Do you know?

We live in a world of lots of things. Have a baby, and suddenly your house and your car are full of things. You hope for the child to have lots of things in life. Health, wealth, hit the ball, make the basket, college, cars, a 401(k), and things. Every parent has a list of things and hopes that their child will also develop a drive for these things.

It's all well and good, but it's only one-quarter inch deep.

And one doesn't always know that until THINGS start to fall apart.

I like that picture on the cover of your bulletin. It's a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph taken where all good photos are taken - Iowa, on the Des Moines River. Moments before this photo was taken, a fishing boat went over the dam, and two people were in it. You can see one barely keeping her head above water, and the only thing she has is a prayer, and a prayer can come in the form of a scream, loud or silent. "Help me."

The rescue squad was unable to reach her. A construction worker who was helping to build a nearby pedestrian bridge knew he could reach her. He improvised a belt and chain. He swooped in and held on to dear life. The woman later called him her "angel from heaven."

He's not from heaven, he's from Iowa, which maybe is heaven. His name - Jason Oglesbee. He was born in 1963 and baptized in water. He had no idea he would be an agent of salvation.

It is quite a photograph. That hand reaching for the other! Reminiscent of the scene painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The spark of life.

It is quite a photograph. You have the sacrifice. You have to give your life to gain life. There is power and weakness. The two are strangers to one another.

Saving the stranger. The crane and cable, the pendulum swing... time is of the essence. Swinging back and forth, seeking the touch. The focus of salvation. All other things go out the window. There is no question about religion, sexuality, or politics.

That would have made for interesting news: "A construction worker called his rescue mission quits today after getting near enough to a drowning woman to hear who she voted for in last year's election." As Jesus said, "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." (*Luke 12:34*) Things.

When the water is over our heads, no savior reaches down with a handful of conditions. "I'd like to save you, I surely would, but have you been a jerk lately?" "Have you been up to no good?" "Have you been all about yourself?" Here's a thing about the character of Christ: what can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus? Answer: Nothing.

Hebrews is really a congregation. They are a congregation of Hebrews. And they are barely keeping their heads above water. The preacher is trying to encourage his congregation not to give up on their faith in Jesus Christ. They are suffering. Former friends and neighbors verbally abuse them about how they have chosen to follow a crucified Nazarene. They have had property confiscated. Some are in prison. Some released. No shedding of blood, but maybe, as tensions mount, blood is always on the horizon. None of us can imagine suffering as a result of what we believe.

And yet, if present trends continue, I can sense the suffering coming.

Suffering because it is the way of Christ. And if present trends continue with everyone looking out for themselves, we are going to be called to be different. We will call out injustice when we see it, because "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Because our hopes are the same hopes of Jesus, our convictions are the same convictions as Jesus.

You remember Jesus. His life on earth began with a bed made out of a feeding trough. His mother treasured all these things. These things - straw, shepherds, angels, and things.

He was baptized, and the Spirit led him into the wilderness. He didn't have anyTHING. He had the power of God but chose to stay hungry rather than give up his character, his convictions, his hopes.

You remember Jesus. He broke the law, because sometimes the God thing is not the legal thing. You show mercy to your neighbor, always mercy to your neighbor. You never stop showing mercy to your neighbor, no matter what the law says. These are things that are hard.

When they arrested him, the power of God was like that of a lamb taken to slaughter. When hanging on the cross, he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." With his last breath, he still had HOPE, he still had a conviction that he took to the grave - that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

We are to tell these babies that those things are our things.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

It's quite a photograph. It's just 1/60 of a second on June 30th, 2009. Since that time, there's been a lot of water under the bridge.

The woman with her hand reaching up, her name is Mary Ralph Neely. She still remembers the days. "He just picked me up like I was a sack of flour." She said, "Jason didn't want to be called a hero. He shunned any thanks, because he felt so badly that he couldn't save my husband." That's not in the picture.

I found out that Jason Ogilbee, that strong man, is no longer living. His mother recalled, "He didn't really have an address when he died." He was homeless. He struggled with drug addiction. He was a convict. That's not in the picture.

I read where a woman by the name of Angie Brammer, a former meth addict, said, "Jason was the only one who would write me letters and visit me in prison. He helped me change my life." No one got a picture of that, but it might have won a Pulitzer prize if they did.

Another woman, Carri Pendegraph, said, "After my bitter divorce, Jason helped move me and my two small children into an apartment. And he would phone or knock on the door just to make sure I was getting up and going to work." She remembers him reciting bible verses to her. No one got a picture of that.

Here's the picture: we are to encourage these babies and ourselves to have faith in things that no one sees, but they're so hoped for in this world, they're so "convicting" of what is true and right and beautiful, and it speaks to our human condition.

I have a picture of a young woman, skin and bones, on her third round of chemo who said every day, "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." It didn't matter what the day brought, good or bad, you take the day as it comes, and you give joy that on this day you're not alone. "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." I keep that picture.

I have a picture of a young man whose body was filled with tumors. He had a tattoo on his arm. "Did this man sin or his parents?" He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed through him. I have a picture of him.

I have a picture of an older woman with a bright smile, who would go to the grocery store and would make friends with everyone who worked there. How did she do it? She saw them as gifts, children of God. I have a picture. Might have won a Pulitzer.

I have a photo of a man who woke up one day and gave the next day and all his days, his life, to helping men and women go to college, because it's a just thing to do.

I have a photo of a woman who picks up a bag of laundry from the fellas who stayed in the basement of our church. She puts a cup of detergent in the machine, and rinses out the cup in the water. She does this so that Jason can have a good night's sleep. Because Jason is a savior, so is she, so are you, so am I, and so is Jesus! We have this thing, this faith. Can we say it together again?

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Amen.

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