

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
LUKE 12:49-56

FAITH IS...

Does anybody here *believe* that Christmas is going to come this year?
[Responses.]

On what do you base that *belief*? Do you see any Christmas decorations, hear any Christmas music, see any family members wrapping presents with Christmas paper, smell any special Christmas foods?

Well, after all, it's not Labor Day yet.

O.K., so even though Christmas is *supposed* to come *four months* from next Sunday (try explaining that to a five-year-old) -- and there's even nothing on TV yet (thank God) to tell us how many days there are left until Christmas, based perhaps on your past experience you have **faith** that Christmas will come again this year on the 25th of December. And I have faith that you'll be right.

Not only that, but a whole lot of people who do not consider themselves to be church-going Christians *also* share the same "faith" that Christmas (as they understand it) will come again this year. Christmas may mean a lot of different things to different people, but in this country it is *the* most widely-observed holiday and there are broadly shared Christmas traditions in American culture.

We are in the midst of several Sundays worth of readings from the New Testament book "To the Hebrews", highlighting its famous description of "faith" as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In "Hebrews", "things not seen" usually does not mean things which are undetectable by human sight (like ultra-violet light or dark matter) but *things not seen because they haven't happened yet*.

Christmas is certainly something which is "hoped for" by many people (in a variety of ways) and which, at this time of year, is something which is not yet seen. People have faith that Christmas will come and not be suspended as it was in Narnia under the rule of The White Witch. So, people make plans and execute those plans based on their faith.

By faith also Abraham set out on a journey based on the Lord's instructions to "go to a place which I will show you." Try putting that location into googlemaps or mapquest.com. It was simply God's way of saying, "Have faith in me and stay tuned." Abraham did, and so did his descendants, notably Moses, David and the rest of the litany of heroes and heroines the author of "To the Hebrews" cites, and many more people besides.

The faithful believed and believe in a faith (in the sense of doctrines and creeds) which gave and gives meaning and purpose to life while leaving an appropriate amount of room for mystery. The faithful in biblical terms also have faith in **Someone** -- a personal God with whom they had and have a relationship -- who offered and offers strength and guidance to them throughout their lives, especially at key moments of crisis and of decision, as cited in today's reading. And the faithful had and have faith in a *future* which is not yet fully realized.

Any people who plan to have a Christmas tree in their homes each year which is not synthetic have to have faith that somewhere out there what will become their Christmas tree is *now* alive and growing and will be ready for them when they are ready for it.

Christians are called to have faith that the Kingdom of God is *already out there growing* and will be ready -- not according to a calendar on the wall or in a smart phone that we can look ahead to, but according to God's time -- when God calls it to be fully realized. So the author of today's reading calls us to have faith in a not yet fully realized future now being prepared by God.

It's too late for any of us to go out and plant a seedling this afternoon and have it grow enough by December to be even a Charlie Brown-sized Christmas tree. Unless we own a tree farm, we have to have faith that someone else someplace else has planted a tree just for us.

We are called to have faith that God has already planted the seeds of the Kingdom of God and will invite -- and in fact already is inviting -- us to join in the preparations and in the participation for the most wonderful celebration in the history of the world.

Looking back, I realize I've had to "have faith" of some sort in many different contexts. It was "an act of faith" on my part for me to believe that studying algebra was good for me. Actually, it still *is* an "act of faith" -- I haven't used it since High School and please don't quiz me after the service. But people whose judgment I respected (or

had to respect) told me to study algebra, so I did, and I even passed. I guess it was one of a number of subjects which helped me to think better, a Good Thing, even if I don't use it professionally.

So, the reality is that people "have faith" based on previous experiences or based on the wisdom of mentors in a number of contexts besides strictly religious faith, so "faith" is not really a foreign concept to someone who did not grow up in a faith community and in a faith tradition.

A faith community and a faith tradition offer access to a far wider and deeper assortment of *mentors* than we could ever meet in person while growing up: think of all of the characters in the Bible and in Church History since Jesus as well as living people we may meet in particular congregations.

One of these mentors is the author of "To the Hebrews", whose name is unknown.

One of the principles of the Bible is that "the message is more important than the messenger," a radical idea in our era when people become celebrities who have no message at all which is not about them. So it is very possible and even often considered desirable for us to have vast stretches of the Bible of which the human authors are not incontestably established in the minds of scholars. Even the authors we can be sure of rarely dwell on themselves besides Paul and Jeremiah, and their personal struggles were so pertinent to their messages they can be forgiven and even appreciated for the autobiographical details they give us in their works.

Even more than giving us worthy mentors, the Christian faith offers a *relationship* with the One who is all-powerful, wonderfully benevolent, deeply committed to our well-being, knows us better than anyone else, will never "wimp out" or "unfriend" us, and offers us eternal life, now and forever.

Scholars may tell us that "To the Hebrews" Chapters 1-12 is a sermon (or collection of sermons) and not a "Letter" like those of Paul, that it was written by a Jewish Christian to a group of Jewish Christian monastics living in Jerusalem before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 -- or to a Jewish Christian house church in Rome around the year 90 -- and that Chapter 13 may have been written as a Letter by someone else for a different audience -- or not.

Interesting, sure, but the value of "To the Hebrews" does not depend on scholarly research or theories. The book has spiritual value to us because of the truth of its

message, which if anything is reinforced by the anonymity of the author and the fact that none of the heroes and heroines he cites are contemporaries of his: he asks the message to be accepted as *it* is and not because who he is or because of who he's hanging out with.

We, too, are "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." We, too, like the human author of "Hebrews", are in a time of transition -- and are therefore also urged to remember that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow." Let us not concentrate on the author of this New Testament book -- or on any preacher who happens to stand in this pulpit -- but let us "look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

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