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The Assurance of Hopeful Faith

Let me begin this morning by tossing out a term that I learned back in school but need to find a way to use from time to time less I forget what it means: “cognitive dissonance.” Explained in different ways, it basically refers to the feeling of uncomfortable tension which comes from holding two conflicting thoughts at the same time.

An example: Bob thinks of himself as an animal lover, yet kicks a cat in the street for getting his way. Animal lover or cat kicker? When the tension of two opposites is pointed out, Bob may stop kicking cats. The discomfort that is felt can cause someone to change his or her attitudes or behavior so to restore balance. That is cognitive dissonance.

The Bible has its own take on modern psychology, but without the discomfort and anxiety. The first verse of the passage today from of the Letter to Hebrews puts it like this: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. (11:1)

The subject is faith. By faith we understand. By faith Abraham obeyed. By faith he stayed. By faith he received the power to procreate, even though he and Sara were too old.

But what does it mean to have faith?

Churches gather people of faith.

Our vision to live, connect and serve as a congregation is rooted in a desire to live joyfully in faith.

In trying times, what does it mean when you turn to new parents when their child is experiencing health challenges and say: “has faith”

When you look at our world filled with violence and terror, and say: “have faith.”

Or when you or someone you love is caught up in the grip of something beyond his or her coping: have faith.

There is much more to faith than wishing for a different outcome and hoping that someone will change.

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

These ideas and thoughts normally would not hang together. Assurance and hope. Conviction and things not seen. Ordinarily they seem in contraction. In the face of the unknown, who wouldn't want to know?

If someone wants to assure me something is going to happen, I would prefer data and proof to a prediction and a hunch. A week before our son's wedding, I started to think about the weather. Would it be sunny or would it rain on all of our planned events outside? I checked the weather each day. It was looking promising but I was not assured that it would not rain until I woke up that morning and saw to my delight a blue sky.

To arrive at a place of conviction – something so strong that there is no longer room for doubt – we are wired to want to rely on what we see, hear and touch. We are reminded of what the risen Jesus said to a doubting Thomas. John 20:29: Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The point is this: God's desire is not to make us feel anxious and uncomfortable about the future that is beyond our knowing so that we change – it is rather to make us feel assured and cared for and loved and remembered so that we can live fully into who we are.

The reason that we can hold two things together that would be seem to be in conflict -- hope and assurance – is that we do not start out in a vacuum.

We are people with a history and heritage. We have role models and ancestors, like Abraham and Sarah, whose story becomes our own.

We read in Hebrews this summary: By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place not knowing where he was going. They stayed in a foreign land living in tents, living as nomads and wanderers.

To know where you are going in life you have to set out without a destination. To arrive anywhere that matters you have to be willing to get lost along the way.

This is hard for me. When I wake up, I want to know what the day will hold. My phone tells me what the weather will be like -- hour by hour – my calendar reminds me appointments and meetings – and I make plans for the times when I don't need a plan.

I can use an app on my phone to find a location I have never been – I know to the minute when I will arrive and I can be almost certain I will not get lost. That is no metaphor for the faith that I have come to know.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said that "Faith is taking the first step even when you can't see the whole staircase." Abraham and Sara could wander far way because they were rooted in a faith that would never leave them. Their plan – if they even had a plan -- was to believe in

a God who believed in them. Their faith would be as surprising as it was certain: allowing them to bear a child even when very old. They had no problem being seen as foreigners and strangers because they knew that all of us are only visitors on this earth for a certain amount of time.

We can live in hope for a future we do not yet see -- when we are rooted in a faith in God and in Jesus who promised to be with us always. This is our assurance.