

The Substance of Things Not Seen
Hebrews 11:1, 8-16

You have heard the saying, “Seeing is believing.” Well, Hebrews turns that on its head. Hebrews tells us that actually believing is seeing. If you believe in something you can see it, even when no one else can see it. Faith is the ability to see what others can’t see.

Last week we began looking at the 11th chapter of Hebrews, which starts with these powerful words: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction or substance of things not seen.”

As Christians we have to have faith, because we have to believe in the substance of a thing the world cannot see. We have to give substance to it through our faith and by living what we see.

What is this thing? The Bible has several names for it.

The Old Testament calls it “The Promised Land.” The Jews thought the Promised Land is a hot, dusty, rocky little piece of land in the Middle East. It’s not. Hebrews tells us, “All of these (the children of Abraham) died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” Well, Abraham’s descendants have possessed Palestine a couple of different times. So, how can Hebrews look back and say that they never received the promise? Because The Promised Land is much more than Palestine.

The prophets understood that. By faith they could see the real Promised Land. Isaiah told of a land in which “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Is. 11:6-9)

Jeremiah saw it and wrote, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” (Jer. 31:31-34)

Ezekiel saw it and wrote, “And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.

The people of faith in the Old Testament could see that the Promised Land is new heavens and a new earth. They could see that Promised Land, and that vision sustained them.

In the Book of Revelation it is called the New Jerusalem. In New Jerusalem there will be no sin. Because there is no more sin, there is no barrier between heaven and earth. We will dwell with God in the New Jerusalem, living in the full glory of God's presence. There will be no more death, no more sorrows, no more pain. All the residents of the New Jerusalem will love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength, and they will love their neighbors as themselves. In that day God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus called it the Kingdom of heaven or the Kingdom of God. According to Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus' teachings could be summarized in one sentence, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." In other words, since the coming of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is so close you can almost reach out and touch it. Jesus taught that with his coming, God had started building the final home the human race has longed for since the destruction of the Garden of Eden.

The Promised Land, the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God, these and others are different names for the same thing. They are names for the time in history of the world when sin has been defeated and is no more.

Imagine a world in which sin and evil have been defeated. Imagine a world in which the barrier dividing heaven and earth are eliminated. God dwells among us. We are able to see the full glory of God and nothing diminishes the goodness and love of God as they flow over us. The Spirit of God renews us, heals us and gives us life. All people know God and love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. The goodness and love of God wash over us constantly and heal all diseases and renews our lives, physically and spiritually. There is no more death, nor pain, nor sickness.

Imagine a world in which we can hear the Word of God from the very lips of the Lord. We understand and live the will of God. All people care about one another. There are no divisions. Imagine a world in which people enjoy serving one another and put the needs of others before their own. Imagine a world in which all people are treated with dignity and respect. Every person is appreciated for his or her special gifts and abilities.

Imagine a world in which human beings love and respect all God's creation and have learned to live in harmony with the natural world. We will take no more than we give. We will return to our original vocation. Remember, in the creation story Adam and Eve tended the Garden of Eden and took care of the animals. Human beings were created to nurture all forms of life and to protect the world which God created and gave to us as a gift, to maintain the health and the beauty of the earth, the waters and the air.

Christ promises us that day will come. People of faith can already see it. Because of their faith, the Kingdom of heaven, the Promised Land, New Jerusalem has substance. It's real to them.

Because it is real to us, we make it real for the rest of the world in the way we live. Jesus calls us to repent because, if you can see this new world and it is real to you, it changes you. It changes the way you think and the way you act. We are to repent, or change our ways, because we are to start living as if the Kingdom of heaven, the New Jerusalem is already here.

If we are to live as if it were already here, we have to change our ways, because the world lives very differently from the way the citizens of the Kingdom of heaven will live. The present world assumes that people will live selfish, greedy lives and will compete with each other for the things they want and need. When we stop doing that and start living to meet the needs of others, when we stop competing and start cooperating, people will think we are crazy.

It is as if a football coach called time out in the middle of the first quarter of a game and went over to the coach on the other side of the field and said, "My team and I have a great admiration and respect for you and your team. We have decided to do all we can to help you score as many points as you can during the rest of this game." The other coach would probably be upset. He would say, "Wait a minute. That's not football." And he would be right. Football is a game of competition. If you are playing football, you ought to compete as hard as you can.

But life is not a football game. Life is about life. We are all in this boat together. We all float together, or we all sink together. It makes as much sense to live as if life were a football game in which we must divide up and compete against one another as it does to play football as though we were all on the same team.

But that is the world acts, as if there are winners and losers, and we are competing teams battling among ourselves for resources. When Jesus tells us to repent, he is telling us to stop living as the world lives and live as citizens of the Kingdom of heaven, the New Jerusalem.

When we live as if the New Jerusalem already exists we are making it real. We are building it.

Wait a minute, did you say, "We build the New Jerusalem?" I thought God is building the New Jerusalem.

That's right. God is building the New Jerusalem. But God cannot build the New Jerusalem without us--because we are the New Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem is the eternal fellowship of those who have been shaped by the Spirit of God to live in obedience to the will of God. We are the bricks God is using to build our final home. God is forming us and shaping us so that we will fit perfectly together.

We are building the New Jerusalem when we worship God in spirit and in truth. We are building the New Jerusalem when we love our neighbors. We are building the New Jerusalem when we care for God's creation. We are building the New Jerusalem when we live holy and righteous lives. We are building the New Jerusalem when we trust God's promises. When we live as though the kingdom of heaven has already come, we are building it. When we live what we can see by faith, we are making it real. When we live as if it were already here, it is here, in us.

When we live as if the New Jerusalem were already here, the world will think we are crazy. But it's all right if the world thinks we are crazy. They thought Noah was crazy when he built the ark in the middle of a desert. He wasn't crazy. He trusted God's word and so he could see something by faith that they couldn't see. The world thought Abraham was crazy when he left the comfort and security of his home for a strange, new land. He wasn't crazy. He trusted God's promises, and so by faith he could see something they couldn't see.

Have faith in God's word. The kingdom is coming. The New Jerusalem will be. At the end of our pilgrimage there is a Promised Land waiting for us. By faith we can see

it. It is real to us. The world will think we are crazy. We aren't. We live differently from them because by faith we can see something they can't see.

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