

August 6-8, 2022

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

“Seeing Isn’t Always Believing”

1. We can’t trust our eyes
2. Nothing we see is permanent

*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. <sup>2</sup> This is what the ancients were commended for. <sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. <sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup> And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she<sup>[b]</sup> considered him faithful who had made the promise. <sup>12</sup> And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. <sup>13</sup> All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. <sup>14</sup> People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.* Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

Dear Christian friends who walk by faith in Christ, and not always by earthly sight,

If you enjoy deer hunting, you probably have a set of deer antlers mounted in your man cave or cabin. You keep them for others to see. That way, when you tell the thrilling account of how you captured “the beast”, you can show actual proof. With proof, they can’t accuse you of fibbing about bagging that “thirty point buck.” As they say, “seeing is believing.”

But, maybe you saw someone else’s trophy buck and now your prize looks like a little Bambi. If the “beast” only existed in your memory, it would grow larger every time you talked about it. I suppose that’s why God hasn’t shown us precise details of heaven. It would be great to have an actual picture of heaven hanging in our living rooms, giving us something to look forward to. But, so often, we tend to grow attached to this imperfect world, that heaven may not seem so great. That’s why our sermon reading from Hebrews, chapter 11 reminds us this surprising Scriptural truth: **Seeing Isn’t Always Believing.** Seeing isn’t always believing because we can’t always trust our eyes. And nothing we see is permanent.

Have you ever watched a magician on TV or in a live show? These guys trick you into seeing something that isn’t real, like sawing a woman in two or making her disappear from the stage. So it’s obvious, right? We can’t always trust what our eyes are telling us. So too, we often have a hard time living by our Christian faith, because our sinful nature wants to see exactly where we’re headed in this life. But, life doesn’t work that way.

To help us, God gives us the book of Hebrews, chapter 11. You've heard of the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio?. The best football athletes in the game's history are featured there. Well, Hebrews, chapter 11 is the believers' Hall of Faith. But, these aren't the best of the best people listed there. Truth be told, each person who's listed is just an ordinary sinner who struggled every single day. Yes, they were ordinary people with an extraordinary God. What made them heroes of faith? They didn't always trust what their earthly eyes were telling them and instead trusted God. Take Abraham, for example – the main man of our sermon reading. When God told him to leave his home in modern day Iraq and move his family 1000 miles to the West to a small strip of land on the Eastern edge of Mediterranean Sea, what did his earthly eyes tell him? They told him to stay put. He was safe and happy right where he was. There was no earthly reason to move. So God gave him a heavenly reason. God looked into the future saw a place where Abraham's descendants would be a great nation. God saw a place where three continents came together, the crossroads of the world. People from every nation and tribe would pass through the Promised Land in Palestine and hear the saving Gospel message. They'd see the place where Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again to be the Savior of the world. Talk about long-range vision.

Abraham simply trusted God. He had faith that God was right, even though he couldn't see all the details. Hebrews 11:8 tells us: ***<sup>8</sup>By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.***

And once Abraham got to the promised land, what else did he see? God made him a promise when Abraham was 99 years old, that he and his wife would see something impossible. Scripture says it this way: ***<sup>11</sup>And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she<sup>[b]</sup> considered him faithful who had made the promise. <sup>12</sup>And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.*** It's a scientific fact – people don't become parents at age 99. But, Abraham and his wife Sarah trusted God even though they were beyond childbearing years. They trusted God's vision and had a son, named Isaac. And through Isaac, not only did they have more descendants than the stars up in the sky, the Savior of the world came from Isaac's blood line.

Thank God for our vision. Thank God for what we can see in this physical world. But, realize we can't always trust our eyes because there's a spiritual world we cannot see. By nature, we don't see the sins in our own heart, even though we so clearly see the sins of others with 20/20 vision. We can't see the damning consequences for sin. We can't see hell nor the people trapped there in eternal punishment. Maybe that's why we get too enamored with the temporary things of this world and hold on them way too tight. My Christian friends – when it comes to spiritual matters, we need to ignore what our earthly eyes tell us and live by faith. Living by faith means to believe every Word God says in the Bible is true and apply that Word to our lives every day. Look at it this way. Over the years, you've probably acquired quite a collection of tools in your home. I know I have. But there's only so much we can do with a studfinder or a mallet. How many tools are collecting dust in our homes because we only needed them for that one job. May our faith never sit unused in the corner. May our faith be fed every week. By faith, we see where we stand before God – we're sinners headed for hell. But, by faith, we also see our Savior Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. By faith, we see Jesus bringing us true peace and joy that makes life worth living

and death worth dying. By faith, we see the door of heaven opened by Jesus with his perfect sacrifice on the cross. And that vision of heaven's open door will carry us through this life, even when our earthly eyes tell us to give up in despair. When a two-year-old is diagnosed with Leukemia, what good can come from that? When you or someone you love has to face a life-threatening surgery, how do you look beyond today? Dear friends – by using the tool of faith, we see God who loves us dearly and has a purpose for every problem.

And no matter what problem, trial, or test of faith we experience in this life, we know it won't last forever. Faith, given to us in our Baptism, opens our eyes to see that nothing in this world is permanent. Abraham understood that. For more than a hundred years, Abraham lived in tents, always on the move. Not many people I know want to live in tents for very long. Tents don't have hot showers or restrooms. Most people want a house, a place they can settle down. Think about it. The only property Abraham owned on earth was a little burial plot 20 miles south of Jerusalem. He didn't build a permanent house on his family's promised land – and neither did his son Isaac or grandson Jacob. The Bible tells us why: <sup>13</sup> ***All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.*** That didn't bother Abraham, because he knew he wouldn't be wandering forever. He lived by faith. Scripture uses Abraham as an example of faith of every day looking forward to heaven: <sup>16</sup> ***... they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.***

Because Abraham had faith in God's promises, he knew he didn't belong in this world. It was painfully obvious that he didn't even belong in the promised land, because God had told him to live differently than his pagan neighbors. So too, we don't belong to this world. Jesus told us that we are in the world, but we are not of it. I think we all want to fit in – in grade school, in high school or college or even in our neighborhoods. But, like Abraham, resist the urge to act like others if they are doing something God forbids.

Here in New Ulm, God lets us live in a beautiful part of the country. To the South, we have Flandreau State Park. To the West, we get to see blaze orange sunsets. And to the East, we have beautiful farm country that rolls on and on. And maybe we have it too good. It's easy to take eternity for granted. As breathtaking as Brown County is, our view in heaven will be even better. No more problems. No more pain. No more death. Sound like a great eternal life? Absolutely.

When my wife and I came to New Ulm 10 months ago, we didn't know much about this beautiful area. But, now that we've seen it, we're thankful God has brought us here. In the same way, none of us have seen what heaven is like. But, we don't need to see it, to believe it. Once we get there – we will be thrilled beyond belief. Ask Abraham someday in heaven. You'll see him. Until we get there, walk by faith and not by sight. Amen.