

Sermon – Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

David R. Lyle

Grace Lutheran Church

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“Things Not Seen”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ, in whom we place our faith. Amen.

1. Things not seen are not my strong suit. In fact, things not seen seem to be out to get me. I have more memories than I care to think about of things not seen getting the best of me. In particular, I can think of countless occasions when I was called out of my slumber by a crying child in the middle of the night. Although Erika has responded to such cries more than I have, I’ve made my fair share of trips to a child’s room in the middle of the night. I’ll go, do my best to bring calm to a daughter or son, and then return to my room. More often than not, I’ve returned to my room only to run right into a thing not seen in the darkness. To this day, I have a permanent bump on my shin, a lingering badge of nighttime devotion from running into the corner of our bedframe. Things not seen are not my friends. Things not seen tend to work that way. All is well until it isn’t, until we run headlong – or shin long – into a barrier or obstacle that stops us in our tracks. And a bedframe is rarely the worst of it. What of a sudden diagnosis of an incurable illness, or an unexpected pink slip, or a phone call in the middle of the night delivering the tragic news of the death of a loved one. No, things not seen are not our favorite things. Perhaps it is for this reason that we tend to only trust that which we can see with our own eyes. Seeing, after all, is believing. Not only do we fear bad news unexpected; we also don’t trust good news until we verify it for ourselves.

2. It is no doubt surprising, therefore, that when we dig beneath the platitude, the first line of our reading from Hebrews today smacks of pious nonsense: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Really? The preacher of this epistle is a making a claim of such stunning certainty that we can’t help but question it. Faith is what we hope for, and our hope rests in that which we cannot see? When have things we cannot see ever turned out well for us?

3. To up the ante, Jesus tells us today to have no fear. Again, really? Are you paying attention, Jesus? We live in a world with so much to fear, and so much of what we fear lives so close to home. This July was the most violent July in ten years in Chicago. 65 people were murdered in Chicago last month, and the death toll for the year has already almost eclipsed the total for all of 2015. And this is not just about statistics, of course; each number is an individual. Near the end of the month, a young man of 18 named Keyon was gunned down. Keyon was part of the family of our sister church in North Lawndale, Harmony Community Church, pastored by our dear friend James Brooks. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen? Do not be afraid, little flock? Well, we have seen quite enough with our own eyes, and there is much to fear, it seems.

4. So what do faith and hope look like in this world? While we mourn the death of one eighteen-year old, we have also been inspired this week by the life of another eighteen-year old. If you stayed up to watch the opening ceremony of the Olympics in Rio the other night, you were able to see the joy that was the Olympic Refugee Team entering the stadium, ten athletes representing the millions of people worldwide displaced by the agents of fear: war, terror, and death. And yet there they were, entering joyfully into a celebration of sportsmanship that, despite all the problems with the Olympics, still represents some of the best that humanity has to offer. The athlete of this team that has most caught the world’s attention is Yusra Mardini, whose

route to the Olympics has been more difficult than most. A gifted swimmer, Yusra fled her home nation of Syria last year, in search of a better, more peaceful future. Part of her journey was a difficult sea crossing from Turkey to Greece. Along with nineteen others, she climbed aboard a small boat meant to hold six or seven people. Thirty minutes into their journey, the motor gave out. Assistance was nowhere to be found, and all seemed lost. As night set in and the waves crashed over, the refugees tossed overboard anything that could be spared in order to lighten the load. And when that was not enough, Yusra and several others who could swim tossed themselves overboard. For the next three hours, Yusra would swim through the darkness, one hand tied to the boat, pushing, willing the boat to dry land.

5. And now Yusra is an Olympian. And while she almost certainly will not win a medal at these games, she did win her first heat yesterday. So what is faith, and what is hope? Is faith knowing that, in spite of all odds, you will one day succeed and become an Olympian? Is faith simply knowing the outcome; is hope simply wishing for the best? No. Faith is jumping into the water; hope is trusting that, no matter the outcome, there is only one faithful course of action. Faith is gathering in vigil and prayer to remember the life of a murder victim and entrusting him to God's unfailing care; hope is trusting that, while the world looks like it's falling apart, God is yet in charge, and God will neither forget the divine promises nor let go of the people that Jesus came to save. Faith is what Abraham and Sarah clung to in their journey, not knowing where they were going but trusting in the One who called them. Hope is knowing that even though we cannot see the destination, we can see the One, Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who has gone before us. Faith is not basking in the certainty of the daytime, but keeping watch in the long hours of the night. Hope is knowing that the One who promised to return will do exactly that.

6. It is here that the words from today's scriptures rise about wishful thinking or ignorant naivety and move us to the most certain thing in the universe, the promise of Jesus Christ to his flock. It is here that we can live without fear, for we are called, as the writer of Hebrews proclaims, to "a better country, that is, a heavenly one." Our hopes in this world will always be fleeting, for thieves will always come near and moths will always destroy. And if our hope is in this world only, or in ourselves, our hope will always be misplaced or naïve. But our hope is not things of this world. Our hope is in Jesus Christ. And in Jesus, through Jesus, we are called to be light in the darkness, proclaiming life in the face of death and then working without ceasing to help life flourish in this world, in God's name. Through Jesus, we can jump out of the boat. We might not be able to walk on water, but we can, by God's grace, together push the boat to dry land, to the city that God is preparing for all people.

7. Faith and hope are not about knowing that everything will come up roses or work out in this lifetime. There will be bumps and bruises in the night. Faith and hope are about knowing whose flock you belong to. And you, my friends, belong to Jesus. He shows himself to us once more this day in the bread and the wine of Holy Communion, signs that by his death he has conquered death, and by his rising he will give us passage to the Kingdom of God. Faith and hope are the treasure given to us by God, that our hearts may forget fear and that our lives may become light hurled against the darkness. And if you can't see Jesus, that's okay, too. Things not seen are not always bad. Sometimes, Jesus is the One unseen beneath the swirling waters of this life, pushing us toward the city of God. Don't worry if you can't see Jesus. He can see you; his voice calls and comforts along the way. And in his dying and rising, he has promised to get you exactly where you need to go – to the far side of the sea and into the unending glory of the Kingdom of God. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.