

Scripture:

There are many passages in the Bible which speak of Faith. I have chosen these few. First, from the letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 11.

**Hebrews 11** Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup> For by it the men of old received divine approval. <sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.

In verse 8, Hebrews gives this this example of faith, among many others. <sup>8</sup> **By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go.**

I'm adding another reading, this from the Book of Joshua 24:14-15: This is a renewal of the Covenant after the Israelites have settled in the land of Caanan.

<sup>14</sup> **“Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. <sup>15</sup> And if you be unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”**

Finally, at the end of his ministry, Paul writes this to his young successor, Timothy: **2 Timothy 4: <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.**

Three weeks ago, when Reverend Zanicky asked me to substitute for him today, I didn't have a topic in mind. I asked the members of the Bible Study class if anyone had a particular topic they would like me to speak to. This issue of Faith is the topic that was offered. It's not easy to talk about. The whole idea of religion is under attack in our day, in a way that wasn't present in Biblical times. It's hard to find in the Bible passages that speak to doubts in the existence of any God at all.

The pagan world assumed plenty of gods. The problem was to distinguish the true God we worship, the God of Abraham, the God of Israel and of Jesus, from all of the others. In our day, so many of our society disparage religion, and Christianity specifically, as a superstition responsible for most of the world's ills. The argument is usually couched as based in science. As if all of the unknowns in the world that have been the domain of religion, can now be explained by science. The "God of the Gaps" idea is that religion is just being used to explain what science can't yet, and that those gaps are vanishing.

So, in coming here today to talk about faith, I can't simply speak to and draw inferences from just the Bible. Yes, what the Bible has to say, including what was just read, is important. But I feel the need to approach this topic more personally as well. I can't offer any proof to you, that science would accept, for the existence of God. Much less the caring and loving God whom we know in Jesus Christ. What I will do is explain how I have struggled with this issue of faith, and where and how I have found some answers. My hope is that this might be helpful to you, too.

Before I do that, though, just what is this "science" that we speak of? Here are three definitions I found: First, from Oxford: "The systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation, experimentation, and the testing of theories against the evidence obtained." I do like the focus given to experimentation in that definition. This one is from Wikipedia: "Science is a systematic discipline that builds and organizes knowledge in the form of testable hypotheses and predictions about the universe." The words "testable hypotheses" implies experimentation, as in the Oxford definition. Here's a third definition from "The Science Council." That's an organization that is trying to increase the impact of science on society. Here it is. "Science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence." Notice this doesn't explicitly ask for experimentation, and extends science to the social world. That is, "social sciences." The previous definitions referenced the physical world, or "the universe," in the case of the Wiki definition. This progression of definitions seems to track the applicability of "science" from originally the physical world, now to every facet of existence. It is this extrapolation of "science," to explain everything, that cannot tolerate devotion to, or even the existence of, a true religion.

All of the definitions of science require evidence based on observation, and for methods to be systematic. But, some things are not observable, or can't be in the systematic manner that good scientific practice demands. That's especially true of singular events. How can those be explained? In most cases, that's done by gathering more samples. For physical science that works. Sometimes. Here's an important scientific question: How many other planets in the universe are inhabited by intelligent races of creatures? Well.... Having no acceptably provable observations of interplanetary aliens, but knowing we are here, we can only say "At least one." (Of course, someone will challenge the idea that humans are intelligent.) The problem science has is that just one "observation" of intelligent creatures. We now have discovered thousands of planets around other stars. At most maybe ten are anywhere close to suitable for life as we know it. That's just a very small sample of the 100 to 400 billion or more stars in the galaxy. And, there are 100 trillion plus more galaxies. We really just have no idea whether life is rare or plentiful, much less whether anywhere else there is what we would call intelligence.

In like manner, we could ask, "How many people have been raised from the dead?" If we base an answer on systematic observation, the answer has to be "We don't know." The several cases of people raised from the dead in the Bible are reported cases from antiquity that lack scientific rigor. They were not observed systematically. Like life on earth, each is a singular case outside the methods of science. It is legitimate for science to say, "Based on what we currently know of how life works, we don't think it's possible." Well, that's why it's called a miracle. Outside the observable domain and methodology of science.

There is still a lot that science has not been able to answer. "What happens inside a black hole?" "What was the state of things before the Big Bang?" "What is the 'Dark matter' that seems to make up a large part of the universe?" "How does the human mind experience consciousness?" Or, if you accept science's application to society, "How should society be governed?" At least at this time, science does not understand the very fabric of the universe. For every question that science answers, two new questions seem to arise.

So, to my story. I was born into and raised in a Christian family. I went to Sunday School and Church on Sundays, and Bible School for a couple of weeks each summer. My mother's parents were missionaries in the Congo for four decades, so I also heard about and saw slides about life in Africa, and about the

mission to help people there, most importantly, by spreading the Gospel. Yet, I wasn't particularly interested in religion. You could call me a nerd. I was interested from childhood in train engines, rockets, electricity, electronics, and eventually chemistry and computers. My father was a member of the 13<sup>th</sup> Confederate Infantry, a group who, with other teams, did "skirmishing." Those were shooting matches using Civil War era firearms and wearing uniforms to represent the veterans of the war. So, I found myself interested in history as well. I survived school as someone socially challenged, but pretty good with the science and technology bits. I met Cindy and she helped me a lot with the people's skills. I did have to find out the hard way that I wasn't cut out for the Navy. After getting out, I went to graduate school, then took a job in industry where I was designing simulations, among other things. Mostly for the Army.

It was then, when I was approximately 30 or so, that the pastor of the church in which we were members, Larry Matthews, taught a class on how the Bible was written. I came to understand that it was written by ordinary human beings, not all that different from me. Not dictated and copied word for word by God. That is, from our beginnings, humans have been trying to figure out the big issues, what are we, is there a god, if so, what's he like and what does he do? What should be our response? We human beings have been struggling with these issues for at least four millennia, from the time of Abraham on. There are several threads that came together in what we have as the Old Testament, that sometimes seem to disagree. Just like we have four different gospels in the New Testament. But, then, isn't it common for people who witness the same thing to remember things differently later on? I found myself fascinated. It was then that I became serious about reading and learning about the Bible. I taught a Sunday School class for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. It was not long before I was searching for direction, ultimately leading me to come to Wilkes-Barre to teach at Wilkes.

What I discovered was that, across those years, I had made a decision on Faith. Somewhat like the Israelites in the time of Joshua. They had witnessed God being with them. Yes, faith was my default from growing up, but I found myself committed to faith, despite doubts. Here's an example of how that happened: I spent several months at a mission in New Orleans. One night I shared a room with a homeless man I'll call "Larry." Larry said that he talked to Jesus every day. Why didn't I experience that? Was there something wrong with my faith? I came to realize that Larry needed that encouragement from Jesus in ways that I didn't. He was trying to stay off drugs, learn to read, earn money to feed himself, and was continuously living on the margin. He was desperate in needing help. I wasn't.

My mother told me a story from her time when she had come to the United States to go to college. Her parents had been in the U.S. for a year of furlough, and were to return to the Congo. They would be gone for at least four years before she would see them again. She had said goodbye to them at the train station. She returned to her room, and fell onto the bed crying in despair. She prayed to God that her parents wouldn't leave. God answered that prayer. He spoke to her, saying, "This night your mother will become terribly ill, and your parents won't be able to return to their mission in the Congo."

My mother said, "Oh, no. Don't do that. It's what they must do. This is their life. Please, don't do that."

God answered, "Alright. Then, can you be happy?"

"Yes, I will try," my mother answered.

And she was. She said that from that moment on, she was a different person. The weight of loneliness was lifted when, just afterward, a neighbor called on my mother, and invited her to go out with her. My mother was a vibrant, outgoing, and confident person all the time that I knew her. In fact, she even came and spoke here, at First Presbyterian Church, about missions. The occasion was "Praise of Missions" Sunday.

These things, and others, helped me to strengthen my faith and understanding. I didn't need God to speak to me. I came to assume that, if there was something particular God needed me to do, I'd know it.

That did give me a scare. Three times in rapid succession over a couple of weeks, I was asked by someone I hardly knew, if I might consider going into ministry. One was the leader of the Baptist World Alliance, who was a guest speaker at our church in Virginia. I was an usher, and all I had done was say the offertory prayer. After the service, he asked me. A friend who was in the Marine Corps was helping me with building a replacement rudder for my boat. There was a black pastor I'd never met, who worked a day job at the woodshop at the Marine base at Quantico, supervising and helping. I have no idea why he asked me about going into ministry. The third case was comparable. I prayed, "God, if that's what you want me to do, you're going to have to be more explicit than that!" Well, God let me say no. I ultimately came to Wilkes to teach, and that did seem to be the right thing for me to be doing.

I'm sure many of you remember "Cap" Walters, of our congregation. He was as fine a man as I've ever met. He was a Navy guy. At Pearl Harbor he was a signalman on the USS Raleigh, a light cruiser, when the Japanese attacked. He was a member of our Bible Study class. But even he had his questions. He'd say that he wished God would speak to him, to give him reassurance. Now, this was a few decades ago, but by then I had what I hoped was a helpful reply. I told him, "In the Bible, when God speaks to someone, it's because that person is in a desperate situation, or it's to give him something unpleasant and dangerous to do." Cap was already living a fruitful life as a blessing to others, and especially to me. He was faithful. I figured God didn't need for him to do anything that he wasn't already doing.

So, here's where I've gotten to. I don't have all the answers. I don't know what should be done in the terrible situations in the world today. I don't know the answers to poverty, our cultural crisis, or whether stocks will go up or down. But, through faith, God has given me enough answers, for me to live my life as best I can as an individual, trying to follow His way. That doesn't mean I don't make mistakes. I've made plenty. But, I know generally what God expects. It's in the Bible. I know that when I fall short, I have grace through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Beyond the question of faith in the face of arguments for godlessness, there's also the question, "How can a good God exist when there are so many bad things that happen?" Not just evil that arises from humanity, but the destruction caused by volcanos and illness and other things in the natural world. These concerns predate science. The Church's answer has been that we just don't understand. But, God became human in Jesus Christ and shared with us the worst that could happen, out of His redeeming love for us, we of His creation. In light of what science can now tell us about how the Creation works, we now understand better why some of those things happen. Volcanos have a purpose, not just random destruction. They fertilize the soil, among other things. They are an inherent part of the movement of the continents, which keeps our planet's environment renewed and stable. Could we human beings have created a better universe than the one we inhabit? A universe in which there are individuals rather like us with free will? With no problems at all? Even if we had the power to craft an ideal universe, we wouldn't know how.

As to science, we can be thankful for many amazing discoveries. From the time of my grandparents, there has been the discovery of other galaxies, human space travel as far as the Moon, and recently the discovery of an amazing variety of planets around other stars. One of my grandfather's early letters spoke of this new discovery of "germs" as a cause of disease. Since then, there has been the development of many vaccines against such plagues such as smallpox and polio, with others following. When Cindy and I were stationed in Maine, an older member of our church, of my grandfather's generation, as a young man sailed on wooden sailing ships. He remembered carrying cargoes of Christmas trees to Boston. Now we have huge aircraft, that take people almost anywhere for a modest cost. The development of computers, and so-called artificial intelligence, has helped us realize what a marvel, in comparison, God has wrought in our human minds. Each of us surpasses by far what human-designed machines can do in practical awareness and real-world decision-making. We now have many insights into how God crafted a wonderful creation of unimaginable vastness and intricacy.

We, as Christians, can have faith in the promises of God. He loves us, and will gather us to himself when our mortal days are done. The decision to commit to faith, with God's help, will lead to greater understanding, and, yes, greater faith. That is what we can pray for. At the end of our days, we'd like to be able to say, like Paul to Timothy, **I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.**

Amen.