

The conviction of things not seen

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 (August 7, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

I think I've mentioned to you that Lindsay and I enjoy camping. And that we especially enjoy visiting Grasslands National Park, in the south of our province.

The park is designated as a Dark Sky Preserve. Which means that the glare of artificial light is limited. The vast open landscape of the park means that it holds the distinction of being Canada's darkest Dark Sky Preserve. So wildlife is able to experience the natural cycle of day and night. And visitors to the park find a wonderful opportunity for gazing at the stars.



In the evening, when the night is clear, Lindsay and I set up our chairs and watch the sky as the colour changes from shades of blue, to orange, pink, purple – and, finally, to darkness, punctuated with a million tiny points of light. It can take several hours for the transformation to occur. We like to watch the show unfold. Maybe you have done the same.

We wait patiently for that first star. Where will it be? After a night or two, we can become pretty good at predicting it. The first star will appear in one place. Then a second. And soon more arrive! It's a light show that unfolds before our very eyes. Gradually, the whole sky is ablaze with God's glory.



Truth is – those stars are *always* there: all day, as well as night, stars never go away. It's just that we don't see them. The sky's too bright, the sun too strong. Or the city lights of high-rise towers and parking lots drown out the symphony of the sky.

When it's cloudy, we can't see the stars at all. They are hidden behind the misty vapour that floats above us. But don't be fooled. The stars *are* there, whether we see them or not!

There are many things that keep the stars from our sight. One of them is sheer distance. To see more, we use powerful telescopes that take us deeper and deeper into space. And even then, we barely scratch the surface.



There is so much of the universe that is hidden, invisible. Not only *big* things in the sky above, but *small* things here on the earth below: Tiny creatures, individual cells and atoms, and even finer sub-atomic particles that form the substance of our material world. Some of these have *never* been seen, but only exist in theory.

What I'm trying to say is this: the world is like a giant iceberg floating in the ocean. We see only the very tip of it. The rest is hidden beneath the surface. You may think it's not there. But that would be a serious mistake. Great ships that have claimed to be invincible have floundered on such miscalculations. Remember the Titanic?

There are always things going on beneath the surface of our lives. Things that we can miss, to our detriment.



Theologian, Andrew Root, says that the *secular* frame of the world we live in prevents us from seeing the reality of God. We are conditioned by what we think is plausible. We're not inclined to see anything beyond the surface of our existence. But like the stars, God is still there, *always!* Whether we see God or not.



“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*,” claims the writer of Hebrews. Who then goes on to assert that the world was created by the word of God. “What is seen was made from things that are *not visible*.”

As people of faith, we proclaim there is a Creator. That there is a meaning to our lives. And that the world is *more* than a random collection of chance happenings and accidents.



Abraham was a star-gazer. One night God took him out of his tent and had him look up into the sky. “See the stars?” asked God. “Now count them, if you are able.” Abraham knew was an impossibility.

Then God gave to Abraham a promise, one that can only come from the God who gives us life, the God who imparts to us a sense of purpose, the God who comes to us and calls to us in love ... the God who nudges us (and all creation) toward health and wholeness, justice and peace ... in other words, toward the life of God's Kingdom:

“Your descendants will be as many as the stars,” said God. And Abraham had the audacity to believe it! *That* was the essence of his faith. He simply trusted what God was able to do.



Woodcut by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld from "Die Bibel in Bildern", 1860.



Faith is not an easy thing. There are always objections that can be raised. Faith stretches our human logic to the limits. It may not break that logic, but it certainly does transcend it. It goes *beyond* it. Believing in the Realm of God takes us as far as we can possibly think for *ourselves*, and then says, “let me take you one step further.”

God, by definition, is not bound by the limitations of our latest theories. God is always *beyond* our very best explanation. After all, if God could be held captive by our little minds, *that* God would be God.



God told Abraham, “I *will* do this.” Despite the undeniable fact that Abraham was old. And Sarah, for many years, was unable to have a child. And so the logic of the secular frame would say “this promise of God is impossible.”

“Descendants, really? As many as the stars? Nah. It's late. I think I better go back to bed.”



And yet, says the writer of Hebrews, “From one person, and this one *as good as dead*, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’ (Hebr. 11:12) From one as good as dead! Well, from two, actually, if we make room for Sarah. Both of these were near the end of their lives, and the limits of human possibility.

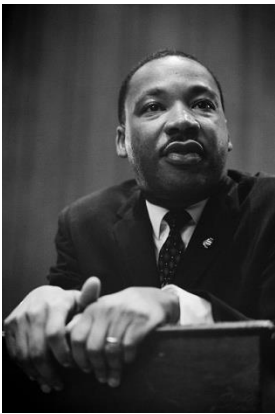
If you were a betting person ... Are *Mennonites* betting people? Do we take such risks? Is it worth putting our money on God? Well, maybe we could! Since we know, from the life of Jesus, that God is in the habit of raising the dead. (We'd be the last people on earth to be able to explain it. But we *believe* it, don't we? We *are* people of faith, are we not?)

I'm not asking you to believe just anything. I'm asking you to believe the very heart of our gospel proclamation: that God raised Jesus from the dead. And therefore we have *life*. And the world has a hope that rises above the crushing darkness of our day.

Because in the darkness shines a light. A tiny pin-prick of a star piercing through the canopy that hangs above us. That hangs above your head right now. A glimmer of God's goodness and an invitation to believe in that goodness, to put our faith in it, to *trust* it, with all that we have and all that we are.



You and I are called to live and work for what we *cannot* see!



I think of Martin Luther King Jr., the American civil rights leader of the 50's and 60's who worked for a more just and equitable society. He wanted coloured people to have the same rights and privileges as others.

On the surface of things it seemed an *impossible* dream. But he saw *beyond* the current circumstance to envision a new reality. And he trusted that *God* was in that movement from death to life. King said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

We travel toward a future we do not always see. Yet we believe in it. We put our trust in it. Enough to *move* us. Authentic faith is about trusting the promises of God, so that we *act* upon them. We move toward them. We embrace them.

Abraham packed his tent, gathered up his family and his belongings, and *moved* toward a promised land. He didn't know, exactly, where God was taking him. We often don't, do we? We only know that, when God calls, we have to *go*.

When things get hard, the journey long, and our faith begins to waver – then we pray that God will *keep* us going. That God will renew our strength, give us eyes to see. Keep us from discouragement, renew our hope.



Abraham began the journey. But he never lived to see his future descendants, as numerous as the stars of heaven. Because it was a multi-generational promise.

Moses, another of God's faithful ones, led the people out of slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea. After that, they wandered forty years in the wilderness. You think they weren't discouraged? Moses never did enter the promised land. He only caught a glimpse of it. But God allowed him to see it from afar.



Martin Luther King did a great thing. He set a nation on a journey toward racial justice. “I’ve seen the Promised Land,” he said. “I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!”¹ The next day, he was assassinated. 52 years later, the day King dreamed of has still not arrived. But we *continue* the journey. We keep following God’s Kingdom way.



“We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work,” says one eloquent writer. Only a tiny *fraction*.



“*This* is what we are about,” the writer says,
“We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold a future promise. ...
We may *never* see the end results ...
We are workers, not master builders ...
We are prophets of a future not our own.”²

The writer of Hebrews, after naming a whole multitude of Israelite heroes, came to that same realization: “All these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised.” (Hebrews 11:39) No, it’s still to come!

When you look at the world around you, what do you see? War, conflict, destruction? Self-centred politicians? Ever-growing populations of those who are homeless and displaced? The lasting effects of colonialism? The historic and ongoing sins of the church?

We see a creeping secularism that, while offering us many gifts, can also make us blind to the presence of God and deny our spirituality. Justice, peace, the fullness of life – these still seem so very far away!



Do you ever wonder what lies ahead? Sometimes the church is simply called to wait. And keep doing those things we’re called to do: Plant the seeds, water the earth. Preach the gospel. (And we’d better make sure it *is* gospel – Good News, not bad!)



“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” We *do* see ... glimmers of hope, many signs of God’s ongoing work in creation. We see the stars at night and know that God is so much bigger than we can imagine.

Here, in the church, in this gathering of God’s people, we wait for God’s revealing. We go forward as we are called. We trust that the future is in God’s hands. And so we live by *faith*, praising the God of life and all creation! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “*I’ve Been to the Mountaintop*,” delivered 3 April 1968, Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters), Memphis, Tennessee. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>, Accessed August 6, 2022.

² “Creating the Church of Tomorrow: A prayer sometimes attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero”