

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on October 22, 2017 at Victory of the Lamb on Hebrews 11:1-2.

Series: Seeking Certainty
Today's Focus: Fear No More

"Shoo, Fear...Don't Bother Me!"

(Christ has won the victory...this I know with certainty)!



One of the things I'm not always too certain about is heights! How about you? Last year in central China the world's highest and longest glass-bottomed bridge opened to visitors {show pic}.

It connects two mountain cliffs in what are known as the Avatar mountains (where the movie was shot). It's about 1,200 ft. high...

1,400 ft. long... and 20 ft. wide. How many of you would be brave enough to stride out across it with its transparent glass panels beneath your feet?



Today we're talking about the vital role of faith in our lives and here's the passage that will help us learn how fear will never overcome faith—not when we understand what faith is. Hebrews chapter 11 begins like this: ¹ **Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.** ² **This is what the ancients were commended for.**

So if I were to ask you what is faith on the basis of this passage, what would you say? Perhaps, in a word, confidence. Or, being sure. Being certain. Those are excellent answers! But being sure of what? According to the verse...of *what we hope for*. Of *what we do not see*. Like God—whether he exists, whether he cares, whether he is willing to forgive you despite what you've done in your past. Like whether your prayers just sort of dissipate into thin air the second you whisper them or whether God actually hears them. Like whether God has a plan and the power to work out all things in your life, even your mistakes, for your ultimate good or whether everything that happens to you is all just random chaos and bad luck. Like whether or not you will be welcomed into heaven when you die.

¹ **Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.** There's an interesting word in this verse. The original Greek word translated "being sure" literally means "something that stands up underneath you." Kind of like that transparent, glass-bottomed bridge that I showed you. Something that's really, solidly there even when your senses tempt you to think it's not. Something that's going to actually hold you up if you step out to walk out across it. Faith then is not just some blind leap in the dark. It's not a baseless sort of just hoping for the best. It's a being sure of things we cannot see. It's a confidence that the promises of God are as real and certain as the ground beneath your feet.

Friends, are you sure of where you stand in relation to God and his promises? Or perhaps you wonder, "How can I ever be sure, Pastor Ben? How can anybody know for sure?" And I get it. We live in a world where skepticism and doubt have been elevated practically to the level of virtues. Ironically too the world tells us the only thing we can be sure about is that we can't ever be sure of anything. It's no wonder we live in such a confusing, broken, and sometimes scary world.

Actually, this isn't just a problem for us modern people. 500 years ago, Martin Luther was tormented by his fear—especially related to his uncertainty regarding his relationship with God. The catholic church of his day taught that you can't ever be sure of where you stand with God because you can't ever be sure whether you've been good enough for God to accept you. Your relationship with God was seen as conditional—based on your behavior and morality. Based on the level of your obedience to the rules. Based on whether or not you dutifully performed all the acts of penance that were prescribed for you by the priest in order to clean up your past. Church therefore wasn't a place where you went to learn about what a gracious God has done for you. It became a place where you went through the motions of fulfilling your obligations to try and earn forgiveness one little morsel at a time.

So as Luther grew into adulthood his sensitive soul was tormented day and night by his sins—both real and imagined. The question that tormented him was, "How can a sinner like me ever find favor in the sight of a righteous God?" So for a time he did what a lot of people still do. He thought, "I've just got to try harder. I will become more religious." And so he became a catholic monk. He took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He thought if he escaped the world and went to live in a monastery away from it all, then he could engage himself all day in religious looking practices like regularly scheduled prayers, fasting, and other harsh treatment of his body. And if he could refrain from all worldly pleasures, temptations and concerns... maybe this would make God love him more. Maybe this would soothe his conscience and help him find the certainty he was seeking. He longed to be able to answer with certainty the questions, "Does God love me? Could God ever forgive me?"

You ever wonder about that yourself? In the night when you wake up and the past you've tried to bury comes back to haunt you. When shame about how you've made someone else feel threatens to smother you. When the guilt you've been stuffing down jumps up and grabs you as if by the throat and threatens to choke the life out of you and all you hear is an accusatory voice whose whispers grow in volume: How could you? How dare you? You hypocrite. You fraud. Just wait until you're exposed for what you really are. No one's going to love you for who you are much less God." When fear of dying causes your adrenaline to surge and your heart to race and your mind to dart down all kinds of dark alleys about how you're going to get what you deserve because you know deep down that's how the world works: *you reap what you sow*. You can't help but assume it must work like this also with God.

A couple weeks ago I was out walking in the neighborhood. I saw that my neighbor had a friend over who was helping him work on his classic car. So I went over and started chatting. I eventually invited the guy to church and you know what he said? "Church? O no, definitely not for me. I'd probably get struck down by lightning right there on the spot the second I'd step in the doors." What an awful thought, isn't it? Yet I think if we're honest we all have these moments, don't we? Behind all the ways we modern people try to downplay or explain away the very concept of sin, there is still that little supreme court we all have called our conscience. And what do we do when that conscience announces a verdict based on how well we've measured up to the unchanging standard of God's law written on our hearts: Guilty!

Now on the one hand, this is actually good when we need to have our sinful pride smashed into bits because we've gotten spiritually complacent and we've begun to drift away from God and think we don't need his word and sacraments anymore—at least not very much. This is good whenever we start to think it's ok to adapt God's standards, maybe not for everybody else, but at least for ourselves and

our own situations so as to accommodate the path we want to pursue with *our* lives. Our conscience serves us well when it rightly convicts us of our guilt and condemns us as worthy of God's wrath according to the law of God.

But how can a person quiet a guilty conscience when it has been rightly alarmed by God's law? And I'm not talking about the dead-end ways of trying to ignore it or of self-medicating it with drugs or alcohol or with an addiction to pornography as a distraction from it. I'm not talking about loathing yourself with a twisted hope that in this way you can sort of do penance for your sins and so silence the pain. I'm talking about finding God's way of being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. I'm talking about finding confidence in the sight of God to do away with guilt and fear. Can we find such confidence? Is there a way to have true hope and lasting peace with God?

Friends, yes there is! It's called *the gospel*. And this gospel message is our fear swatter! The last couple weeks my office here at church has been filled with flies that linger on the warm window. So the first thing I do when I come in is get them with a combination of my trusty fly swatter and a little handheld vacuum. But no matter how many flies I swat in a day...just give it an hour and it seems there are always ten more buzzing around. Fear is kind of like those flies, isn't it? There's always more coming around. So today I want to give you the fear swatter of the gospel. I want you to be able to use it to say, "Shoo, fear...don't bother me!" Remember...¹**Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.** ²**This is what the ancients were commended for.**

So what's our fear swatter? It's the fact that we are saved by faith alone! You see, here's what Martin Luther discovered and the reason why we are celebrating this year the 500th anniversary of what has come to be known as the Lutheran Reformation. The message of God's law says, "God is righteous (sinless, perfect, holy) and he will punish everyone who is not righteous." This is true. But this message of God's law cannot save us. It cannot give us confidence. All this message of God's law can do is expose the depth of our sinfulness and the utter folly of thinking we could ever be righteous in God's sight in and of ourselves. But once this message of God's law has done its work in our hearts of leading us to confess our sinfulness, then we're ready to get receive our fear-swatter: the message of the gospel!

¹⁷**For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."** (Romans 1:17). Right here, this verse from Romans 1:17 triggered the beginning of an awakening for Martin Luther. In his seeking of certainty, Luther began to search the Scriptures (always a good idea!). As he did, God opened his eyes to the wonderful way God himself answers the question, "How can a sinner find favor in the eyes of a righteous God?" And what God showed him was that the Bible's consistent answer is simply by faith. By faith in Jesus Christ alone, apart from anything we do. Yes, God is righteous and he says we must be righteous to enter into heaven. This is the law. But in the gospel that very righteousness which God says we must have... he actually gives us! He credits to our account the validating, perfectly spotless record of Christ's obedience. Everything Jesus accomplished when he came—lived, died, and rose—as our perfect substitute, God gives to us by faith in him. ³**What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."** ⁴**Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.** ⁵**However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the**

ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness (Romans 4:3-5). This is why Luther said, “When I discovered that, I was born again of the Holy Ghost. And the doors of paradise swung open, and I walked through.”

What can give us certainty? It will never be our own feelings, that’s for sure. Our feelings are fickle. But the gospel is the message of God’s steady, faithful love in Jesus Christ which is sure and certain. No matter who you are, no matter what’s lurking in your past, Jesus died on the cross for you and just those very sins that smother you with shame. The forgiveness that he won he now freely offers you through his word, and through the waters of your baptism, and through his body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. He says, “This forgiveness is *for you.*”

One of our Seminary professors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary recently wrote: *“Faith is the unspeakably joyful realization that God’s heart is a thousand times warmer toward me than was my mother’s at that moment when she laid eyes on the red, squalling, infant me for the very first time. Faith is the certainty that God harbors toward me not a single ounce of ire or displeasure, not one thought that is the least bit disapproving or even ambivalent. When Satan objects that I am a sinner (spot-on, as far as it goes), faith hears the Holy One of Israel answering: “So he’s a sinner. What’s your point?”*

Remember the guy I mentioned who said he was afraid he would be struck by lightning if he dared to step into a church? You know what you could say? “I understand, friend. I sometimes feel like that too but what I’ve found is that you don’t actually have to be afraid of that happening because that’s what already happened to Jesus. God struck him down at the lightning rod of the cross where he died in our place to absorb the punishment for our sins. He did this so that in exchange we might receive God’s full and free forgiveness simply by trusting in him. Our church teaches about God’s love and the full forgiveness we have because of what Jesus Christ has already done for us.”

And finally, friends, check this out. When that glass-bottomed bridge I showed you at the beginning of my sermon opened last August, they actually took sledge hammers to crack one of the panels and then



drove a car over it to prove it was safe {show pic}. Now when you see that, wouldn’t that also give you a little more courage to walk out there in faith? It’s strong enough to hold you up! So it is with faith in Jesus Christ. He is the sturdy bridge who will take you all the way to heaven. You see whether your faith right now feels weak or strong, the reality is that Christ’s love is strong enough to support you. His blood poured out on the cross is strong enough to wash away the stain of every one of your sins. His forgiveness continually offered to you through God’s word and sacraments is strong enough to carry you all the way home to heaven and to leave behind the shame of your past forever. And as we together trust in Jesus we can encourage each other along the way and say, “Shoo, fear...don’t bother me! Christ has won the victory...this I know with certainty!” Amen.

¹ Pages 3-4 https://www.wls.wels.net/rmdevser_wls/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Cherney-and-Biebert.pdf