

## The Fourth Week of Lent • April 6, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Hebrews 11:1, 29-40

“By Faith: The Faith of the Israelites”

Why is it that uncertainty is such a *certain* part of life? It seems like it's always difficult (maybe impossible) for us to know what's coming, even if whatever it is might be right around the corner. This week, a lot of us are wondering about the uncertainty around the anticipated federal government shutdown. Will legislators be able to reach an agreement that would prevent a complete freeze of the government's payroll? Will it come to that? If it does, how long would the shutdown continue? What happens when federal employees' and military workers' paychecks stop going out? We might make educated guesses, but we can't say for sure. Something unexpected could happen. The future is always just out of our reach. Uncertainty remains.

Joshua, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel: some of these names may sound strange to us today; however, all these people lived through times of uncertainty. We've been going through Hebrews 11 in these weeks of Lent, and each of these men and women pop up in our reading from the close of this chapter tonight. The author of Hebrews holds them up as example of living by faith. Why them? Why would the Jewish Christians of the writer's day take encouragement from the lives of the ancient Israelites? And for that matter, why would we Christians today? Like those other people that we've read of in Hebrews 11, these individuals weren't perfect models of holiness. We can see that when we read their histories in the books of the Old Testament. Rahab wasn't even an Israelite: she and her family were foreigners from Jericho, that city whose walls came a-tumblin' down. In fact, the Israelites **as a nation** didn't always live by faith. They complained against God. They chased after the false gods and idols of the people who'd lived in the land before them. They repeatedly doubted and failed to listen to God's warning through His prophets. They didn't live according to the calling God had given them to be a light to the nations and a kingdom of priests to the world. But to this uncertain people, God showed His certain grace.

Even though the people weren't perfect, God raised up servants among them through faith. We see in Hebrews that all Christians – whether they're from the First Century of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – **can take encouragement by looking back at the work that our Lord has done in the lives of His people**. He remained to be faithful to His promises. At the Red Sea, God gave **deliverance** and **victory**, even though it looked like the Hebrew people were on the verge of certain defeat. At Jericho, the Lord **overcame** the certain security afforded by the city's walls, and Rahab's God-given faith led her to **protection** for herself and her family by trusting in the God of Israel. God provided **leadership** for generations through the judges, answering the people's cries even though they continued to turn away from Him once their problems had been solved. Kings like David and Solomon served as instruments of God's care for His people, **defending** them against their enemies. Through Elijah and Elisha, God gave **life** to sons once dead and returned them to their mothers. The Lord gave **endurance** and **courage** through faith to His prophets and the faithful Israelites who faced persecution. God has done amazing things through faith, even though the world has not been worthy of His work.

We have something in common with the Israelites and the early Christians: we're not worthy of God's work among us, the gift of His grace in faith. We get caught up in uncertainty and doubt, wondering if God is really there, if He cares for us. Even as we grow in our faith, we still struggle with these things in life. Uncertainty, in some form, remains. We need encouragement. We need assurance.

We have something else in common with those early Jewish Christians, something that the ancient Israelites never would see: the fulfillment of God's most amazing promise in the Messiah. Throughout the Old Testament, faith called people to look to the Lord in hope, looking ahead to the promised reward of perfect life with Him. In these New Testament times, Christians can look back to Jesus in faith and take comfort in the certainty of the cross and the empty tomb. But we, too, look ahead in hope. We look ahead to the fulfillment of God's promise that we will have perfect life with Him, life that will be ours in its fullness on that Last Day when our Lord Jesus returns. We will share that life, that "something better" we read about in Hebrews 11, with all those Israelites with strange-sounding names who lived and died in faith.

We may live in an uncertain world. But by faith, we have sure hope. In Jesus, we have the fulfillment of the promise to which the Israelites looked forward by faith. In Jesus, we have the certain evidence of God's certain grace.

Amen.