

Sunday, August 11, 2013: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

by [Robert C. Saler](#) in the [August 7, 2013](#) issue

One of the few reliable maxims in theology is that the simpler the question, the tougher the answer. Volumes of scholarly articles examining centuries of intellectual struggle emerge from questions that are strikingly stark: Who is Jesus? Why does evil happen? What is salvation? What is the point of the church? The less these questions are adorned, the more pressing they become.

This is not because the simpler questions are somehow ineffable or because the Christian tradition lacks adequate responses. The simplest questions can be hardest to answer because the tradition has bequeathed to us a glorious excess of images and narratives through which we can address the deepest issues of life. Christians are often reduced to a kind of blessed stuttering, not because they lack things to say but because they struggle to know which of the many available answers is the right one for a given situation.

In my childhood the adults who surrounded me often emphasized the importance of “having faith.” “Have faith in Jesus” was the deceptively clear advice—it was meant to reassure me and discourage me from too much fretting over hard problems. But the advice was actually an impetus to my efforts to try to find out more about what it meant to have faith in what cannot be seen. Teresa of Ávila wrote that “Christ has no body but yours,” but the truth is that I became more and more confused. I was being asked to have faith in a person whose presence was far from obvious, and that created more problems than it solved. The simpler the answers, the more the questions kept nagging me.

I went through seminary and graduate school and into parish ministry. The more familiar I became with the Christian tradition’s vast repertoire of images for “having faith,” the more I found myself mentally stuttering when I was faced with the question: What does having faith actually mean? I wondered, “How do I know if I have it? What difference does it make?”

Martin Luther would say that having faith is trusting in God’s promises of salvation. A liberation theologian might talk about faith being evident in acts of solidarity with

those struggling for justice. Others might speak of intellectual or existential acquiescence to a given church's dogmatic teaching. Finally, some might simply take the line made famous by former Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart. When faced with the task of defining another notoriously difficult concept, Stewart said: "I know it when I see it."

The New Testament consistently portrays Abraham as the chief exemplar of faith. Abraham was willing to "set out" in obedience to God's command, not knowing where he was bound or how his family would survive the journey. His willingness has been understood by Christians as prefiguring the life lived in the hope of Christ's redemption. Though contemporary sensibilities lead Christians to think twice before imposing New Testament readings on Old Testament narratives, the fundamental pathos of faith as a pilgrimage taken on the "conviction of things not seen" still resonates deeply in the Christian imagination.

One of the most powerful features of the letter to Hebrews narrative is the way it highlights the longing of Abraham and his descendants for "a better country," a city that is worthy of being a true "homeland." According to the letter, these people responded to God's call not with self-satisfaction but with more longing—longing for a city in which they would no longer be strangers and foreigners.

The fact that this passage is shot through with longing gives it a unique place among the images that a Christian might choose when answering, "What is faith?" Often faith is understood to be the answer to longing—one longs for something more than what one can see in life and finds blessed assurance in faith. This is not wrong. But Hebrews invites us to understand longing itself as an expression of faith.

Talk of the afterlife and of heavenly cities elicits many critics who claim that pie-in-the-sky rhetoric devalues life on earth. This does not have to be. The heavenly city does not reduce the value of our home on earth; it enlivens that home with possibility and energy for action. Dissatisfaction with a world that's subject to death and injustice can motivate a social worker or inform someone who's caring for a parent who has lost an infant. To desire transformation of the world as it is and long for a home beyond this world are not contradictory impulses. The push and pull between the two creates a space where the gospel can encounter and encompass the human experience in all its depth.

When we cry out in rage at injustice or mourn in the face of loss, we are affirming that the act of crying out is not in vain. When we long for a life beyond what seems possible, we bear witness, however tentatively, to the reality of such a life. When we become so resigned to the world of pain that we no longer bother to yearn, when we become so cynical that flat silence becomes the only authentic way of being in the world—then we've lost something essential to our humanity.

During the days and long nights when the positive connotations and content of faith seem far away, it is a comfort to hear God's word itself testify that longing is its own kind of faith—and that restlessness in this world might be the way the world as God will make it enters our lives.