

INI - SDG

18th Sunday a. Trinity
October 11, 2009
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Hecla, SD

Text: Hebrews 11:13 - ***“All these died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”***

Theme: A PILGRIM’S JOURNEY OF FAITH

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ Jesus,

“Fellow pilgrim partners.” The students of Immanuel Lutheran College in Eau Claire grew very accustomed to hearing these words each time Professor Michael Sydow stepped to the microphone to give his chapel addresses. He would open his chapels by addressing the students and faculty of Immanuel as “fellow pilgrim partners.” I imagine Prof Sydow got that phrase, in part, from our text. Christians are, as the writer to the Hebrews says, ***“strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”***

The only association most of us have with pilgrims is the story of the pilgrims that arrived in America on the ship the Mayflower and landed at Plymouth Rock in the early 1600's. But what exactly is a pilgrim? Why does the writer to the Hebrews speak of those who ***“died in faith”*** as pilgrims? And why did Prof Sydow speak of himself and his chapel audience as “fellow pilgrim partners?” My Greek dictionary defines a pilgrim as someone “sojourning in a strange place, away from one’s own people.” (Vine) The pilgrims who founded the colony at Plymouth Rock were in a strange place - America. They were away from their own people in Europe.

Prof Sydow spoke of himself and his fellow Christians as “pilgrim partners” because he recognized this very thing - that we Christians are sojourning in a strange place. Earth is not the true home for the Christian, heaven is our home. As the Apostle Paul writes, ***“While we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord.”*** (2 Cor 5:6) While on this earth we are, in a way, away from our own people - the people of God, the saints triumphant.

This past week the pilgrimages of Prof Sydow and retired pastor, Bertram Naumann came to an end. No longer are they absent from the Lord. No longer are they sojourning in a strange place. They have, as our bulletin cover states, fought the good fight of faith, they have finished their race, they have kept the faith. While their pilgrimages have ended, ours continue. Let us therefore consider the pilgrim’s journey of faith. May God, through His holy Word, strengthen us in the midst of our journey of faith.

Our verse for this morning comes to us from the section of Hebrews known as the “Heroes of Faith” section. In chapter eleven the holy writer directs our attention to the faith of those who have gone before us. He writes of the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah. He goes on to write of the faith of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses. Of Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. Here in chapter eleven he writes of men and women of faith who were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

People today often speak of faith in vague terms. They say things like, “you gotta keep the faith,” or “you just gotta have faith.” But faith in what? Chapter eleven begins with a definition of faith. **“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”** (11:1) Faith must have something of substance to rely on. There must be something hoped for to which faith looks. Blind faith is no faith at all.

The faith of those Old Testament pilgrims was no blind faith, but faith in something. By the power of the Holy Spirit they had a living, active faith. Faith which believed that God was faithful and would keep all of the promises which He had made. The writers says in our text, **“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them.”** They Holy Spirit gave them eyes of faith which had perfect vision and saw God’s promises as real and true.

These words of our text remind me of the last days of Moses. Moses was chosen by God to free the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Canaan - that land flowing with milk and honey. For forty years Moses led them through the Wilderness. But along the way Moses disobeyed God. And because of his disobedience he would not be allowed to enter the promised land of Canaan. But God did allowed his servant Moses to see the promised land before he died. **Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is across from Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land...(and) said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have caused you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."** (Deut 34:1,4) Moses saw it from afar of, yet never set foot on the soil of the promised land of Canaan.

Isn’t this what it is like for every Christian pilgrim on his journey of faith? Take for instance Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would make a great nation from him. He said that his offspring would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore and stars in the sky. Yet Abraham only had one son, Isaac. With his eyes of faith Abraham only saw these things afar of and he was assured that it would be so. God promised Abraham that his offspring would inherit the land of Canaan for their possession. Yet Abraham never saw David sitting on his throne in Jerusalem. But with the eyes of faith which the Holy Spirit gave him, he saw them afar off and was assured that God would do so.

The greatest promise God made to Abraham, though, was when He said that through Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed. By this promise, God was saying that the Savior of the world would be a descendant of Abraham. But Abraham died LONG before Jesus was born. Yet with the eyes of faith which the Holy Spirit gave Abraham, he saw Jesus afar off and was assured that God would accomplish what He promised. Jesus says as much in John 8, **“Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.”** (Jn 8:56) By faith Abraham was assured of Jesus’ day, by faith he saw that day, and Abraham died in the faith glad, trusting in that Savior. That was this pilgrim’s journey of faith.

Each Sunday during their pastoral ministries, Pastors Naumann and Sydow spoke of the amazing promises of God. They preached about the crucifixion of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, though they never saw the nail prints in His hands. They preached about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, though the risen Lord never appeared to them. They preached about the sureness of heaven for all who believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, though with their eyes they never saw the saints arrayed in white before the throne.

They were just like Moses, standing on Mount Nebo. With their Spirit-created eyes of

faith these pilgrims read through the scriptures and saw the Promised Land of heaven. As pastors and a professor they described to their congregations and students what they saw in His Word. They saw Jesus and heaven with their eyes of faith afar off. They were assured of the promises God had made and proclaimed them to others.

But the gifts God blessed these servants with reached far beyond the pews of their congregations or the desks of their students. Looking over the promised land of heaven Pastor Naumann put together an adult instruction manual which other pastors have used to guide men and women through the teachings of Scripture. Having seen from afar the promises of eternal life in Jesus Christ, Prof Sydow compiled a catechism, in which many of our young people throughout the CLC have been instructed. By the Holy Spirit, these men were so assured of the promises that they taught them to others.

But they did not merely help other Christian pilgrims on their journey of faith. Like Abraham and Moses, these men ***“embraced”*** the promises themselves. Theirs was not merely a faith which they taught, instructed, and preached about, but it was their own faith. Literally, they welcomed and greeted the promises of God with the open arms of faith. They welcomed the news that their sins too were forgiven for Jesus sake. They too embraced the promise that the Son of God loved them so much that He laid down His life to save them. They did not merely distribute to their parishioners the body and blood of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper for the forgiveness of sins, they too partook of this blessed meal for the strengthening of their faith during their journey. The Spirit that gave them eyes of faith

They too, with Abraham and the Old Testament Christians, ***“confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”*** This is why Prof Sydow addressed his listeners as “Fellow Pilgrim Partners.” Earth was not their home, but a temporary dwelling place. Their whole lives they were journeying to their true home, their eternal inheritance, in heaven and helping other Christian pilgrims on their journey of faith. Though Abraham was a very wealthy man, the only piece of land on this earth that he owned was a burial plot for his wife Sarah. Abraham was a stranger in a strange-land while on earth. He was a pilgrim, journeying by faith on this earth.

“These all died in the faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” The journey of faith for these pilgrims have come to an end. They are pilgrims no more. By the grace of God they have entered the Promised Land that they had only seen from afar. Whereas before they had seen dimly, now they see face to face. Whereas they only knew in part, now they know just as they are known. By the grace of God they have come to their homeland.

But this is not just about Abraham, Moses, Pastor Naumann, and Prof Sydow. No, fellow pilgrim partners, this is about you and me. They have concluded their pilgrimage in this strange land but we are in the midst of our pilgrimage. The writer says in chapter 6, ***“We desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”*** (Heb 6:11-12) God wants us to imitate these heroes of faith that were faithful unto the end. Imitate their diligence to hear and learn God’s Word. Imitate their faith in the promises of God and patience to see the fulfillment of those promises.

So many are the great and awesome promises which God our Savior has given to each one of us. Each of God's promises begins at Calvary. It begins with the Son of God giving His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. It begins with Jesus saying, "It is finished" as the punishment for our sins is completed. From there God's promises to us go to the empty tomb. Jesus who once was dead now lives! In Christ we too shall live! Our sin has been removed forever and we have been reconciled unto God. We are at peace with God. The promises of God reach their pinnacle in heaven, the home for the people of God. But these promises are only the beginning! His Word is full of the precious gems which faith clings to. Can you see them your eyes of faith?

Praise be to God who has graciously supplied to His people, faithful servants of the Word such as Prof Sydow and Pastor Naumann. May the Lord of Harvest continue to raise up faithful men to lead His flock to the still waters of His Word. Praise be to the Holy Spirit who has given us our eyes of faith. Though the fulfillment of these promises are only now seen afar off, we are assured of them in Christ Jesus. We embrace and welcome them. We confess that we are strangers and pilgrims here on earth, longing for our homeland of heaven. Fellow pilgrim partners, this is our journey of faith. May God guide our steps and lead us safely across the Jordan to the Promised Land of heaven. In Jesus' name, amen.