

This week I had a meeting at First Christian, and I handed out worship bulletins to each member of the group, thinking I was meeting with the worship committee to look over our worship order and bulletin design. Those in the meeting looked at me with a blank stare and asked, “Why are you giving these to us? We’re here to review the new church directory design.” I suddenly realized I thought I was attending a different meeting, and I replied, “I’m sorry, but I’ve been a bit foggy the past few weeks due to whatever sinus allergy or infection I’m fighting. I feel as though I’ve been wandering around in a cloudy haze.” I went back to my office and retrieved the correct set of papers, but as our meeting progressed, I was a bit befuddled that I could be so easily confused.

I imagine each of us has had similar days, when our minds are cloudy, a bit fuzzy from fatigue or medications or illness. Plans seem to go out of focus, as though the eyeglass lens of our brains has clouded our view of the world.

The writer of the book of Hebrews seems to suggest that when we cannot see clearly, that’s the perfect opportunity for faith, for he writes that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of *things not seen*” (11:1, NRSV), or as another translation states, “Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of *what we don’t see*” (CEB). *The Message* Bible puts another twist on the translation: “The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on *what we can’t see*.” Or as I suggest: Our trust in God helps us hang onto our hopes and dreams even when our minds are cloudy and we can’t see clearly what lies ahead.

Every congregation I have served as pastor over almost 30 years has pondered what it means to trust God, to have faith, when everything in our church and culture seems to be shifting sideways and we can’t see what’s coming or understand why things have changed. Maybe you’ve noticed some of the changes:

2

- Less people have an interest in joining organized groups, such as bowling teams, Kiwanis or Rotary, or church.
- Families are more scattered across the country, meaning younger generations don't have as much contact with their extended family, which makes passing on the faith more difficult.
- Neighbors don't sit on their front porches and talk with one another much anymore, so we've become disconnected from those who live near us, making it more difficult to talk about faith or invite a neighbor to church.
- Since we purchase more online from our home computers, shopping in neighborhood stores has become less of a social gathering, creating more disconnections in our communities.
- We hear less stories from hunters about their recent hunts to provide food for the table and instead hear more manifestos from angry mass shooters who go on a rampage,

even in malls and movie theatres, making us feel less secure about leaving our homes to go to places we used to think were safe.

All of these factors influence something we see happening every Sunday: as our culture becomes more disconnected and filled with anxiety and we crave leisure time alone on weekends in the safety of our homes, church pews that used to be crammed with people now have more empty spaces. In each of the congregations I've served, I've sensed an underlying anxiety about the future, about that cloudy time ahead, wondering who will be around to serve the church.

As we've read together selections from the book of Hebrews over the past month, I've sensed a similar underlying anxiety among those who first received this anonymous writing. It's almost as though the writer was replying to questions from members of the church about their time of anxiety:

Church member: in the past the high priest sacrificed animals to reassure us of God's forgiveness, but what about now? How do we know we're ok with God?

Writer of Hebrews: Jesus is like our high priest, who offered the sacrifice of himself. He died trying to tell us about God's love for everyone, even the outsiders. He reminds us of God's covenant with humanity, of God's promise to always be with us.

Church member: Why is life so difficult? Some in the church are persecuted for their faith. It doesn't feel safe to be a follower of Christ.

Writer of Hebrews: Jesus knows our difficulty of life, for even he suffered and died an unfair death. Through Jesus, God has experienced the pains of this world, making God more in touch with your life, who will remain with you through good and bad times.

Church member: How do I know if I have enough faith? How do I know if I'm following God the right way?

And here the writer of Hebrews launches into a litany of those who trusted in God throughout their history, beginning with Abel who offered a sacrifice and received God's approval. Enoch trusted God and was taken into heaven. Noah stepped out in faith and built a giant boat when he learned of an upcoming torrential flood. Abraham trusted God and took off for an unknown land in order to pass

on God's blessings to the world, and his wife Sarah discovered she would bear a child in her older years. The list continues with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and then we're reminded of Moses, who barely escaped death by the Pharaoh as an infant, and then as an adult Moses challenged the Pharaoh to free his people from slavery.

The writer continued with a whole list of other men and women, and I noticed a common element among all of them: faith was not easy. Each of those the writer named faced challenges, had days when their trust in God seemed hazy, a bit cloudy. They had days when it seemed difficult to know what was ahead, when the path seemed obscured by a misty fog.

It's in those foggy times that we need a light, something to help us see, as was the case with those living in a little Scottish village.

Back when electricity was first being introduced...almost everybody in a particular church switched from the propane lanterns to electricity just as soon as it could be hooked up. However, the oldest couple in the congregation

couldn't get their electricity because they were waiting for the poles to go up and the wire to be strung. So, they continued to use their propane lanterns.

The day finally came when the electricity was brought into their home. Everyone came for the festive event. The old man waited for it to get extra dark; then he told his wife to go turn on the switch. When she did, the light filled the room, and everyone rejoiced. The old man grinned from ear to ear, picked up a propane lamp and said, "It sure makes lighting my lamps easier." And with that he lit a lamp, and his wife turned off the electricity.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes, even when we have light, we may feel unable to see through our cloudy days. Even though the early church had the light of Christ to guide them, they still faced uncertain times. The writer listed all those who had gone before them who struggled to see their way, but he spoke of their πίστις (pistis), a Greek word used in the Bible

most often translated as *faith*, though the word carries the active meaning of a verb. It's better translated as the word *trusting*, or we could make up the verb *faithing*. It involves doing and following God even when the way ahead seems cloudy.

Hebrews suggests, "So then let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us (12:1 CEB). In the midst of their cloudy days, when it was hard to see ahead, the writer reminds them that they do not travel through the cloud alone, that those faithful followers who trusted God witness made it through the cloudy times. That message continues to echo in our lives today. When the way ahead seems cloudy, when you're not sure what step to take, the cloud of witnesses from the past remains with us, reminding us that God walks with us today in clouds of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for*

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*Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3265-3272). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #543.