

## **Hebrews 11:1-13**

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and 'he was not found, because God had taken him.' For it was attested before he was taken away that 'he had pleased God.' And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth,

## **Hymn of the Universe - Teilhard de Chardin**

**August 29, 1020**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

Something said to me Friday night, "Don't go to that volleyball game." And then when the decision was made to go, something else said to me, "Wear something green, not blue." It was the CSU Ram Women--how can there be a Ram Woman, tell me?--and the Duke Blue Devils. "Devil with a Blue Dress On," I get. And most of the congregation was there. We could have taken up an offering. The woman who sold me my ticket comes to the church, looked at me in my blue shirt, and said, "You are going to cheer for the right team, aren't you?" Someone else, after the game, said, "This must have been difficult for you." For those who don't know, I graduated from Duke in 1969, I got my primary theological education as a Blue Devil at the divinity school. How can you have divinity and Blue Devils on the same campus, I don't know. 41 years wearing blue, 41 years of "Go Duke." Sitting in Moby Gym, from a Fort Collins vantage point, for the first time in my life, surrounded by Ram Fans, and the words barely whispered, "Beat Duke," and they did.

Vantage point. It's all about vantage point. Have you ever seen the Royal Gorge? It's down there in the southern part of the state, where they have a prison, Canon City. Have you ever see the Royal Gorge, this huge divot cut out of the earth, made by water? Fifteen hundred feet above the Arkansas River, and they've got this bridge, and it was built in 1929, and when you go over the bridge and you look down, you see the great walls of granite and the roaring river and everything is so big, and it just looks like you can see forever. There's a largeness to the scene. Looking from the top of the world, almost, looking down, it's a spectacular vantage point. But there's another way to look at the Royal Gorge. You can take a train that runs through it. We did, here, recently. You can take a train, and you can look up, and you can take the train and you can see kayackers paddling in the water, and you can see deer on the side of the bank, and mountain goats, and when you look up, that bridge that you thought was so wide when you were on it, is just a little string, like a little rope going across. From the bottom of the gorge, it looks so different, and you see people up there, and they look so small. And cars. It's all about vantage point. It's all about what you see and where you look. It's all about where you sit, and whose side you're on.

This morning, we're going to have a look-see. I'm going to invite you to look with me from the vantage point of a French Catholic theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, born in France in 1888. His childhood was happy. His mother helped him appreciate the spiritual world, while his father taught him to appreciate the world of science, and he was a theologian. But the church did not respect his thinking, and banned him from teaching or publishing his ideas. His books were published after his death, in 1955. This is his vantage point. He was a paleontologist, he had a doctorate in ancient civilizations, and spent much of his time in China. He discovered Peking Man, one of the most profound links in the chain of human evolution. This morning I want to invite you to join with me in a vantage point to look-see under the direction of Teilhard de Chardin, for what is, I submit to you, as important as what he thought, though that is important. It is significant how he looked, and what he saw.

First of all, Teilhard de Chardin was able to look at the worst and see the best. He was an optimist. We need optimists these days. Jean Rostad said, "Far too often, the choices reality poses are such to take away one's taste for choices." We need people who will counter the attitude that speaks of exhilaration as "that feeling you have just after a great idea hits you, and just before you realize it will never work." Teilhard was an optimist. He looked at the worst. He saw the best. He was an optimist. He looked at some terrible things. He was a stretcher-carrier in the first world war. He saw the horrors of war. He looked at the worst of the human condition, the violence of war, the stark inhumanity of it all, and what he saw was the courage, the bravery of the soldiers who were willing to die for their country, and die for their comrades. He looked at the rise of nuclear weapons and the balance of terror, and the potential he saw was that all nations would begin for the first time in human history to realize we can destroy our enemy, but the wind will change, and it will destroy us. And the only way we can live in this world as the human race is to decide that we've got to get along.

He looked at the church as it rejected his ideas and denied his right to publish, and he said, "The church can keep me from printing my books, but it cannot stop me from writing them." And so he wrote *The Future of Man*, and *The Divine Milieu*. He wrote *The Phenomenon of Man*, and *The Hymn of the Universe*, and many others. He looked at the worst, and he saw the best. His attitude, in a world that couldn't care less, we have got to be the people who couldn't care more. And if it's true that suffering colors life, it is also true that we can choose the color.

I like the advice Socrates gave when asked if one should find a spouse and marry. He said, "By all means, marry. If you find a good spouse, you will be forever happy. If you find one that's not so good, you will become a philosopher, and everybody else will be happy." Alvin Toffler wrote in his book *Previews and Premises*, "We live in a world filled with cruelty, sorrow and anger, along with radiant promise, and the only way to survive is with a sense of humor and an appetite for survival."

John Ortberg in his book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, tells a story about when he and his wife and friends, another couple, took a ride in a hot air balloon. There were five of them, there was the pilot and the Ortbergs and this other couple, friends, and Ortberg decided that he wanted to get to know the kid who was flying the balloon. "How did you get into ballooning?" he said. "Dude, it's like this. Spent most of my life surfing, got into ballooning by accident. One day, driving around in my pickup truck, having had too much to drink, crashed my truck and injured my brother, and he couldn't get around very well, but the one thing he could do and he enjoyed was watching balloons. Gave him something to do, and so I'd take him there, so that's how I got into it." And then he went on to say, "By the way, if things get a little choppy on the way down, don't be surprised. I've never flown this particular balloon, and I'm not so sure how I'm going to handle the descent." Ortberg's wife looked at him and whispered, "You mean to tell me that we're a thousand feet up here in the air with an unemployed surfer who started flying hot air balloons because he got drunk, crashed his pickup truck, injured his brother, and has never been in this one, ever before, and doesn't know how to bring it down?" The wife of the other man in the balloon spoke the only words anyone uttered until the trip was ended, when she said, "You're a pastor, John. Do something religious." So Ortberg took up an offering. It's in the book.

In a world of negative outcomes and unintended consequences, in a world where Murphy's Law seems to be the prevailing order, what could go wrong often does. If we intend to do something religious, the most important thing we can do is to help change the vantage point, you know? When it seems the answer is no, we can look for how it can be yes. In a time when most have given up, we can find a way to give back. These days when our political campaigns appeal to the lowest common denominator, the religious thing is to see the good in the bad, and look for the best. These days, when we're filled with a downturn, the religious thing to do is to start the movement to turn up. Bob Kaufman said, "Way-out people know the way out, and the way out is the way up." And Tim Keller was right when he said, "If we are worse off than we've ever dared to imagine, we can know that God loves us more than we have ever dared to hope." Oprah

Winfrey said, "Every time a heart cracks somewhere, something beautiful is beginning to be born."

Optimists look at the worst, yeah, but they see the best. If there's illness, then there is wellness, and often with wellness there is healing. And healing comes, not when we're completely well, because healing is internal. If there is despair, yet there is confidence, and trials can be trumped, and tribulations can be triumphed over. And if there is the fear of death, then there is faith in life eternal. We look at the worst, but we see the best. God has foreseen something better for us, the writer of Hebrews tells us.

Secondly, Teilhard looked at the past and yet he saw the future. He was an optimist, but he was also a futurist. In a forgotten corner of China, he and the others with him had the good fortune to find evidence for the existence of Paleolithic humans not known before. And this is what he said when he came upon that discovery. "Today, what counts for me is the future of things, whereas I am plunged into the past." And he went on to say, "The world is building. It is the birth of the spiritual reality formed by souls as existence evolves. We are moving forward. A process is alive in the universe." He looked at the past, but he saw the future. See, that's the problem. Often we fail to look far enough.

After an after-dinner speech that seemed to go forever, or maybe it was a sermon that didn't seem to have an end in a timely manner, perhaps like this one, the guest speaker turned to the toastmaster, MC Will Rogers, and said, "I am so sorry I went beyond my limit, but I left my watch at home." An Rogers is supposed to have responded, "Don't you have a pocket calendar?" A pocket calendar. Will Rogers was a futurist. If we ignore our watches, let's start looking at our calendars. When Desmond Tutu, the South African archbishop, was walking by a construction site on a temporary walkway that was wide enough only for one person, a white man appeared at the other end, recognized Tutu, and said, "I don't make way for gorillas." And Tutu the archbishop stepped aside and with a broad sweeping gesture he said, "Oh yes, but I do." He was looking at the future. He was looking at an Africa and the end of apartheid.

Children can hit the truth so close, even as they miss it so far. They have the ability to get at the essence of things somehow. Like the child who was asked to sum up what all she had learned in Sunday School. It would be interesting to ask these kids some time. Just, you know, without any notes or a book or anything, tell us what you've learned being in Sunday School at First United Methodist Church. In some ways, she got it exactly right. Of course, in some other ways, as you'll hear, she got it exactly wrong. This is what she said. "This is what I've learned. I've learned that Jesus was the star of the New Testament, that he was born in Bethlehem in a barn, and during his life he had arguments with sinners like Pharisees and Republicans. He also had twelve opossums, and the worst one was Judas Asparagus, who was so evil that they named a terrible vegetable after him. And Jesus was a great man. He healed many leopards, and even preached to some Germans on the mount, but the Republicans put Jesus on trial before Pontius the Pilot and Pilot didn't stick up for Jesus. He washed his hands instead. Anyways, Jesus died for our sins and he came back to life and then he went up to Heaven, and he will be back at the end of the aluminum. His return is foretold in the book of Revolution."

The inaccuracies and mistakes do not diminish the truth that the Christian faith is all about the future. When we think about the coming of the Christ at Christmas, we call it Advent, or the second coming of the Christ at the end of time, which was a factor in the formation of the church, or the birth of the church, or the body of Christ, or the building of the kingdom of God on earth. It's what the writer of Hebrews said. It's the assurance of things hoped for. It's the conviction of things not seen.

Teilhard called this the omega point. He said that in the human race, love has become conscious of itself, and what is evolving is the spirit. He said there are setbacks. There is nothing guaranteed. There are disappointments, but that will not stop the continuing little-by-little, step-by-step, everything finally linked to the supreme center. Creation is not finished, he said, it continues still. The future of life, the future of the world, the future calls us. It is here, it is now, for those who can see it. Optimism and futurism.

Finally, you have to ask yourself, what is the force behind it all? Theism, God. God is behind it. If we look, we can see it, and we don't have to look above the world to the supernatural, we can look within the world because God, Teilhard thought, was in the world. He found God in the world.

Victor Hugo once spoke of the power of music, and he said, "Music attempts to express what cannot be said about something on which it is impossible to be silent." God is like that. God is that of which it is impossible to speak with accuracy, and yet there is such evidence in the world that we know something has to be said. A child playing the piano, a salesman comes knocking at her door. The child keeps playing. The salesman looks into the window and he saw her and she saw him and the two make eye contact, and he said to her, "Excuse me, is your mother home?" And the little girl stopped playing and answered, "Mister, what do you think? Look what I'm doing. I'm here practicing the piano. Isn't it obvious? She's in the basement listening." Look what we're doing. Look at the world. Isn't it obvious? Something has influenced us, or tried to.

Robert Fulghum claims to have come to believe in God in a strange way. He said, "When I was young, I wasn't sure I believed in God, but I knew I believed in Howard. Howard was my mother's maiden name. That name came up many times in family conversations. I learned in Sunday School, "Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name." I thought we were saying "Our Father, which art in Heaven, Howard be thy name." And I knew my mother was a Howard, and I knew indirectly I was a Howard, and if God was also a Howard, then we must belong to God's family. And then to think," he goes on, "how it ended. How we would say, 'For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever,' I went to bed every night as a child feeling well-connected to the universe. It was a Howard family enterprise."

Well, we are connected. God is in the world, and we are part of it, and if we look we will see it. And it is obvious. If we experience a tug at our hearts to do something for the good of all of us, then we have been touched by God. If we catch the spirit of the movement and a holiness that awakens us on our journey of faith, to the point that we realize that we

are not human beings having a spiritual experience, that we are spiritual beings having a human experience, then we are awakened by the God we worship and responsive to it. And if we have known a time of darkness when we didn't know where to turn or what to do, and then to discover the light at the end of the tunnel, maybe just a spark or a little flame before it rises into something that reveals the brightness of the new day. That is to respond to the God who is in the world inviting us to remake the world, beginning with ourselves, as we become a new person. It was Katie Couric who said, "I used to think that when you grow up, you actually stop growing. How wrong I was." What keeps us growing? It is God, as we continue. If we look into our souls, we will see the influence of God. If we look into the fabric of the world and see that there is something alive and at work, and we do not abandon the world, rather we participate in it and build it up, for God is in the world, you see.

Here's the thing. Theism, belief in God, if we cannot look for God in the world, we will never see God. Futurism, hope for tomorrow. If we cannot look for the future in this life, then we are condemned to repeat the past. Optimism. Confidence in the positive. If we cannot look at the bright side of things, then we are doomed to live in darkness. Vantage point. Have you ever seen the Royal Gorge from underneath, on the train looking up? Have you ever seen the Royal Gorge from on the bridge, looking down? If you haven't seen it from top to bottom, then you really haven't seen the Royal Gorge. And if you've never know optimism, futurism, or God in the world, then you may find yourself at a volleyball game, cheering for Blue Devils or worse, at a football game cheering for, excuse me, buffaloes.