The gambler could not remember the last time his cards looked so good - three aces and two queens. He was sure his full house would win. There was big money in the pot, more than he had ever hoped for. He went all in. The others called. As he flashed around his full house, one of the others began showing his twos - four of them. His full house had been beaten by four of a kind. But he had been so sure, so certain, so hopeful. What happened?

So what is the difference between that gambler's confidence in his cards and what Hebrews 11 talks about: Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see? He was sure of his hope to win. He was certain that his cards were high, even though he could not see the other hands. What is the difference?

This is not just an academic question. How often aren't our hopes been disappointed, like this gambler's? Haven't there been times that you were so sure of something only to find out later it was not so? Or have you ever been accused of blind faith, believing in something that's out of step with the real world? So what makes your Christian faith different than that gambler's? Or are we all just gamblers, hedging our bets for eternity?

So what makes the Christian faith different than a gambler's bet? The writer to the Hebrews, instead of stating what makes the Christian faith different, he shows us by listing believers from of old. As we look at just a small part of that list today, we see what the difference is.

He starts by taking us back to the very beginning. By faith we know that the universe was created by God's Word, so that what is seen did not come from visible things.

Why do you believe that God created the world out of nothing in six regular days? You were not there to see it. No one else was there to tell you about it. In fact, many of the highest authorities in science and the greatest intellects in our world today deny what these words say. They argue that the evidence shows a gradual change over time, an evolving from the simple to the complex. If you go to almost any natural history museum, you will see them lay out the steps of evolution over millions and billions of years.

We could rightly argue over their interpretation of the evidence, but that does not bring sureness or certainty, does it? At best it leaves the whole thing in doubt. But doubt is the opposite of faith.

So why is faith so sure and certain that the universe was created by God's Word, so that what is seen did not come from visible things? Are you so sure because it feels degrading to imagine that our ancestors were monkeys and microbes? Are you so confident because you need someone bigger than yourself to hope in and lean on? As true as these things are, if they are the reason for your faith, then your faith is no better than that gambler's. You believe only because you want it to be true. That is not what the ancients were commended for.

Why did they believe and why do you believe that God created all? Because God says so. He alone was the eye-witness. And he tell us: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And it is not just Genesis 1 and 2 that tell us so, even though that would be enough, but it is woven throughout the Scriptures. For example, we have this verse in Hebrews 11. Exodus 20 says: In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them. Psalm 33 says: By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made. Psalm 124 calls him the maker of heaven and earth. Through the prophet Isaiah the Lord God
declares: \textit{It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it.} And Jesus himself said: \textit{From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female.} And those are just a sampling. There are a lot of pages you have to tear out of the Bible to hold onto evolution.

So your faith is sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see, not because it makes you feel good or it sounds reasonable or you have seen it for yourself (none of us were there at creation), but rather because that is what God has said. And he is reliable, trustworthy, and true. That is what gives your faith sureness and certainty.

That is brought out all the more as we look at Abraham. Why did he leave his homeland and go to a place he had never seen? Did he dream big, imagining that he would set down firm roots there? So many today think that faith means to dream big, to have confidence that you can accomplish your goals. If that had been the case, Abraham would have died disappointed. The only land he owned was a field and cave in which he was buried. Faith does not mean to dream big.

Why did he go? \textbf{By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance, and he left without knowing where he was going.} Why did he go? Because God called him to do so and made his promise. Abraham's descendants would one day possess the land and later through them the Savior would come who would bring blessing for all peoples. What an inheritance! Abraham never saw any evidence that all that would happen - remember he died only owning his burial plot. But God's promise is all the evidence faith needs.

Abraham was not simply dreaming big; he was counting on God's promises. So sure and certain was Abraham that God would keep his word that he left the land he knew and lived and died as a stranger in a foreign land. Faith takes God at his word. Faith is sure and certain because God is trustworthy and true.

Abraham was not simply dreaming big; he was counting on God's promises. So sure and certain was Abraham that God would keep his word that he left the land he knew and lived and died as a stranger in a foreign land. Faith takes God at his word. Faith is sure and certain because God is trustworthy and true.

So also, Abraham believed that he and his wife Sarah would have a son. He believed, even though Sarah was barren and they were both too old. That was the reality of the situation. He believed not because he wanted it so bad. Yes, he longed for a son, but that is not why he believed. He believed because God had promised it. Note what it says here: \textit{Abraham considered him faithful who made the promise.} Faith is sure and certain because God is faithful. He is trustworthy and true.

So my friends, look to God's promises. They, and they alone, give your faith real sureness and true certainty. Think about it. When something is promised, you have not seen it happen yet, have you? If I promise my wife that I am going to clean out the garage, there is no proof that you can see. There is only my word. That promise is the only evidence it will happen. And I may prove unreliable for one reason or another. But God is trustworthy and true. His promises are more reliable than any evidence you can see or touch or reason out. His promises are the unseen proof that give faith its sureness. They are the unseen evidence that drives away doubt. Faith is certain of what we do not see because of God's promises.

And his promises are what give us hope. If you promise a child that you will take him to the rides at the fair, his face lights up in hope. But after you have kept the promise, hope is replaced with a fun time and pleasant memories. Hope looks forward and eagerly anticipates what we do not yet have. The promise holds out that future good, faith trusts that promise, and therefore faith hopes.

Now human promises often fail. Hope easily ends in disappointment. How different God's promises are! The hope God's promises bring is as real and sure as if we already had it. His promises do not fail. His promises give our faith and hope a reality so that what he has promised is more real than this robe that I can actually touch. Hope that believes God's promises will not be disappointed. For he is trustworthy and true.
And look at what he has promised for you, who through faith are citizens of Christ's kingdom. Because of God's promise, Abraham was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. That is the hope that God's promise gives to your faith as well, dear Christian.

Abraham knew he was a stranger. He was not just a foreigner in the land of Canaan. He was a stranger to this earth, an alien. His fatherland, his home country was not Ur of the Chaldeans where he had been born. He could have returned there if he thought that was his real home. His fatherland was not Haran where his father had died. And Canaan certainly was not his home land. He and his son and his grandson lived there in tents as temporary residents. They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Indeed, people who say things like that make it clear that they are looking for a land of their own. And if they were remembering the land they had come from, they would have had an opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better land - a heavenly one.

So how do we now live as we remember that we are strangers here? We live as aliens on this planet longing to go home, and I am not talking about outer space or extra terrestrials or ET going home. I am talking about heaven. Even though we have not been there yet, Jesus has made it our true home. He has prepared a place for you there. Heaven is your fatherland.

You have been reborn through the water and Word of Baptism, reborn as a citizen of heaven. God is not ashamed to be called your God and claim you as his people, because you have been washed clean in the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ. Your faith clings to Jesus' righteousness as your only plea that stands before God. It is not Peter or Paul who stand at the pearly gate, but Jesus himself who welcomes you into the heavenly city with open arms.

We are not home yet, though. We are still strangers on this earth. We are living by faith, looking forward in hope to the promised inheritance. So do not grow attached to the earthly. This life is passing away with its glimmer and glitz. Rather keep your eyes on the distance and welcome the inheritance waiting for you. Yes, this life is filled with its disappointments, pains, troubles, and sorrows. Do not let these dampen your hope in what Jesus has prepared for you.

Like Abraham, live by faith - faith that is sure and certain because of God's promises. He is trustworthy and true. That is no gamble. The hope his promises bring will not disappoint or prove false. As you continue in the faith holding on to God's promises, no one and nothing can rob you of your citizenship in the heavenly city. That is the inheritance waiting for you. Count on it. You have God's Word on it from the beginning through out all eternity. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill