



Dr. James C. Howell
Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-19
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In Lorraine Hansberry's play, *Raisin in the Sun*, there's a daughter who grows up and she goes away to college and she becomes very smart, indeed, and she comes home and she is sharing with her family all of her learning, all the advances intellectually that she has made and then she says this, she says "I don't even believe in God anymore." She said "There's science and all and then there's this – I've just come to the conclusion that there is no God." Her mother got up from the chair across the room, walked across the room, slapped her daughter in the face and said "Now repeat after me: In my mother's house there still is a God." In my mother's house there still is a God. I think every church is a stern reminder to a cynical society that there still is a God. There is a God and God is alive and well.

Once upon a time in America, the skylines of cities were dominated by the churches. The churches were the tallest buildings. Now we are exceeded by many business buildings, indeed, but I like the fact that still in America the most beautiful buildings are the church buildings...It is beauty that we contemplate when we worship, the beauty of Christ, the beauty of the body, the beauty of the church.

Hebrews was written for people who lived in an ugly, fearful, uprooted world and to fearful, uprooted people who were anxious indeed, Hebrews speaks to them of faith as the assurance of things that are unseen. Faith as the assurance of things that are unseen. What are the things that are unseen? I would suggest to you that the most important things in our lives, the most important things about us are actually unseen. We live in a society that says "Show me. Show me the money. I want to see it. I want tangible evidence." We measure people based on the curve of their body or their muscularity. We spend our days looking into screens. We relate with something that we can see. We always prefer something that is big and shiny and perhaps because of this we come to lose our sense of the interior life. The most important things are unseen. Consider trees. Trees grow and are strong but not because of what you can see. It's because of the roots that are sunk deep into the earth, where those roots reach down for nourishment. Consider the building. We admire the beauty of this facility, but it would not stand were it not for the fact that when it was constructed, the builders went deep into the earth where we cannot see any more and established strong foundations down in the ground. In your own life, the most important things are things that you cannot see. Right now your heart, inside your chest, that flesh is pumping, isn't it? You're with me. Your flesh is pumping. You cannot see it but without it you would not exist. Your lungs are delivering the nutrients from oxygen into your system. Your brain is enabling you to track this service as we proceed, all the important things. Your truest self is something inside that others cannot see. Sometimes we hide our truest self. Sometimes we want to get our true self out but nobody seems to glimpse it the way that we hoped that they will. Our true self is hidden.

When I think of that poem that Jack Gilbert, wrote it's about a boy coming into manhood and he finally has discovered women. What he says is this, the boy vaguely understood it was not her flesh that was a mystery but something on the other side of it. It is what we cannot see.

Stories – when we tell stories we cannot see what is in the story but we really treasure them. For instance, I could tell you this story. Last weekend I was not here. Did you miss me? I was not here last week because I went to the wedding of Alisa Lasater, a former associate pastor. Now some of you have said "How was the wedding?" I say it was a wonderful wedding – everybody says weddings are wonderful – but this one was really wonderful. Alisa married a fantastic person, and he married way above himself. I made sure that he and his extended family knew that. He's wonderful, but he got Alisa. We tell stories, we all have stories that others do not see. Some of them we should fall on our knees and give thanks to God. Other stories that we know, perhaps some healing is required.

I think about an old song "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" – nobody knows but Jesus. Jesus knows all the trouble that we've seen, but others may not see. Our memories, our memories are so important to us, and they are filtered through our minds and sometimes we try to share them but others can't quite know them. Our wounds, no one else sees. Our fears, no one else sees – our secrets. My daughter, Sarah, said there is a web site where you can send in anonymously your secrets and it's one of the most popular sites on the web. People send in their secrets. No one knows. It is unseen, our grief, perhaps our shame. Perhaps what really gets us excited no one else sees. Yet it is the unseen that really drives us. Love, love itself – love tries to show itself, but how can you really ever know what is in another person's heart? And how do you ever really share what is in your heart? It's the unseen.

Hebrews says that God is intimately involved with what is unseen. It is no wonder that we cannot see God. God is involved with what is really important, with what is unseen. God knows all these things.

You know Rev. Ragsdale over here – George. George is smiling and beaming today. If you didn't know better you would think it's because of the building (Sanctuary reopening after repairs) and so on – but that's not why George is smiling today. George is smiling today because on Thursday night he and his wife, Courtney, went to Presbyterian Hospital and little Claire was born. So George needs our support. He's scared to death. And actually, I was beaming with the same kind of smile when I went to see them the other night. I go there to see the baby of my friend and colleague, George. I'm happy until the nurse meets me in the hallway and says "Are you the grandfather?" (Laughter)...I haven't recovered from that yet. We met Claire on Thursday – we had never seen her before. Now they do those ultrasound things and they could see some in the womb, but God saw Claire in Courtney's room before even the ultrasound could. God was present billions of years ago when God hurled creation into being. God has always seen everything. God sees us now but most importantly, God sees the future. God is in the future. The future is unseen to us but it is not unseen to God.

Hebrews lifts up Abraham as the hero of faith, and the reason for that is this: God comes to Abraham and says "Follow me to a land that I will show you." If I'm Abraham, I'd want to say "Show me on the map. Are there good farms there? Is my family going to do well there?" But God just says "Follow me to a land that I will show you when we get there."

Jesus comes to fisherman and says "Put down your nets and follow me." If I were one of the fishermen, I would say "Where are we going? How's it going to work out?" But they just put down their nets and they followed with no idea of where they were going.

Psalms 119 says *Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.* Lamps in Bible times were no larger than something that you could put in the palm of your hand. I've got a couple of them in my office if you would like to see them. They were made of pottery. They would put oil inside and they would light that oil. It can cast – I don't know – 12 or 15 feet – that's not very far. I'd like to see further into my future if God is taking me somewhere, but maybe God gives us just that much light. We take a few steps and then a few more steps. It seems in the Bible to be sufficient simply to be near the one that we are following, and we trust him, even though we may not know where we're going.

My daughter, Sarah, went this weekend to Memphis to be a bridesmaid in a wedding. The couple getting married clearly is not smart enough to be married because they arranged an outdoor wedding on an August afternoon in Memphis. But they are married now. While Sarah was in Memphis, she went to this museum where they commemorate the death of Martin Luther King. I love the speech that he made on the last night of his life – if you recall these immortal words – he said "We've got difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now." He said, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but we as a people will get to the Promised Land, so I'm happy tonight. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

What we're about is something that is larger than this life. It goes beyond what we can see. It's one of the things that intrigue me about church buildings, this style we call neo-gothic – I love the gothic cathedrals that were built. This is amazing – the most splendid buildings ever erected were made in the 12th and 13th centuries, and what is most amazing about it is the architects who designed those buildings and the stone masons who planted the footings down into the ground knew when they started that they would not see the completion of their building. They knew when they started they would not see the completion of their building, but they were people of hope. They had the assurance of things that were not seen. We live for something beyond this.

I had a friend the other day – thinking about music today – he loves music and is always sending me music. He sent me two different versions of Brahms' Requiem and wanted me to listen to them and compare them and tell him which one was better. I'm riding around in traffic listening to Brahms. Now most people think about the "How lovely are thy dwelling places, oh Lord of Hosts," but I kind of got stuck in the very opening movement. *Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.* Church is about something beyond this life. What we cannot see. The other thing I love about gothic cathedrals is some of the most intricate art work and gothic cathedrals no human eye can see. When they built the cathedrals, they would go up in the attics and artists would make amazing things up in the attics knowing no one would ever see them. Or there are statues that you and I can go to Europe and see the front side but the artist, the sculptor did intricate beautiful work on the back side knowing that we would never see it. The artist did not mind because it was for

God. It was for God. It reminds me of holiness. If holiness becomes too visible it becomes kind of smug and sanctimonious, doesn't it? But holiness is something that is unseen. It is only for God. God sees our hearts, our minds, our thoughts, and our motives. It's not a threat. It's a great comfort. It's our great hope.

I'm really done with my sermon, what's on the paper. There's another part that I want to develop if I'd had time but it was a crazy busy week. Here's what I would have said, I think the passage says that these words are for those who seek a homeland. I think you and I are people who don't know the meaning of home. We don't know the meaning of home. I talked to a guy the other day and I said "Where are you from?" He said "I'm from all over." I think if you're from all over you're not from anywhere. Where's home? I talked to another man this week and his second parent had just died. He said "There's no home any more." We have a craving for home. You have a bad day or you have a great day – what you really want to do is go home and be in that place of comfort, that safe haven, to share your news. We don't know where home is. Let me suggest to you that for people like us, like the first people who read Hebrews, uprooted people, let me suggest that God has created the church to be our home. We use that phrase: This is my church home. It's not a building that we admire. It is our home. God makes God's home in our church home, and we are home here, but not really because what we have learned in this home is that this, our church home, is merely a portal. It is a door; it is a window into what will be our eternal home that we cannot see now but that we long for. It's referred to in 2nd Corinthians 5 where Paul speaks of that home that is not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens, that is the home that we long for with the God who still is. And so because of this, because of the God who dwells unseen but surely with us, we can pray the words of John Henry Newman, who said, "Lord, support us all the day long in this troublous life until the shadows lengthen and the evening has come, the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then in thy great mercy grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest, in peace at last."

Amen.