

## Out of Nothing

9<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pent. – 8/7/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Hebrews 11:1-16 Pastor Keith Besel

vv.2-3 **“For by [faith] the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.”**

### **Introduction**

- ✘ There was a young child who – surprise – wanted a bicycle more than anything else for Christmas. So he began begging his parents and Santa and whoever else he could ask, months and months before December, for a bike. All of his hopes were centered on a new bike.
  - ➔ His father, however, was a bit of a practical joker. So he found a very large box, large enough to fit a bicycle. It was empty. Before Christmas Eve, he wrapped it up and placed it behind the tree. The young boy saw that box behind the tree – out of reach for now and he was sure – absolutely sure – that he had a bike.
  - ➔ But when he finally opened that box on Christmas Eve it was empty. He let out a huge cry of despair, “I got nothing, nothing at all!”
  - ➔ Of course though, in a finely planned scheme, the father then rolled the new bike out to give to the boy. The boy’s despair turned instantly into elation. Where his faith had been shaken, he now had the bike – it was his!
- ✘ But the boy’s experience of “nothing” helps you and me understand the Scriptures before us today in Hebrews, chapter 11 – famously called “The Hall of Faith” chapter.

### **I. God finds us in “nothingness” (vv. 1–3).**

- ✘ The preacher who wrote the book of Hebrews, introduces the idea of “nothingness” by taking us all the way back to the beginning of time – before any of us and any of the physical things we know ever existed; back to when Genesis 1:2 says that “the earth was without form and void”.
  - ➔ It’s out of this “nothingness” – before any of the substances like rock and dirt and vegetation and flesh and blood ever existed; that God created the world and all that we know and see and smell and touch and understand to be a part of the universe; all of this was not created out of things that already existed; things that are seen. Instead He spoke it all into being – out of nothing! God said, “Let there be...” and there it was!
- ✘ This nothingness is a perfect picture of the state that you and I and all people are in at the moment of our conception and birth. Psalm 51:5 says, “in sin did my mother conceive me”. And Ephesians 2:1 says to each of us that “you were dead in the trespasses and sins” in which you walked from the moment of birth. That original state of death that we all are in when we come into this world means that we are separated – disconnected and apart from God and His desire to have us with Him in a vibrant and active life of peace and joy.
  - ➔ In this state of nothingness we have no connection to God. We are: 1) unable to please God, 2) unable to do what is righteous, and 3) unable to prevent our death.
  - ➔ Verses 4-8 of this text show us that even the Old Testament saints who are commended for their faith – before that bridge to God was built and they were given the gift of faith, they too were great big nothings. 1) Abel was no invincible super hero; he was murdered by his brother. 2) Enoch was commended not for his achievements but because God chose him and took him. 3) Noah was an heir of righteousness, which means that he inherited and received his goodness. It was not his own. And 4) Abraham had nothing. He wandered in a land not his

own with no property or goods that were given to him because of merit. He owned nothing himself.

## II. God calls us out of nothingness to faith

✘ So it is that God calls you and me out of nothingness to grant us the free gift of faith in Him.

→ To use the same example as the preacher in the book of Hebrews, the universe – the entire universe did nothing to help itself be created. It couldn't – it didn't even exist until God spoke and it was done.

→ It all came about by the powerful Word of God. This helps us fill out what the preacher means in verse one when he says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”.

✘ You see, the word that is translated there as “assurance” is a tricky word to translate from the original Greek. It is hypostasis (ὑπόστασις) which at its core refers to “the basis for something”; the substance which underlies and gives concrete-ness to something that is unseen or impossible to prove.

→ Faith is a trust and confidence that does not latch onto things that we can see (material things, idols, etc.), but rather onto what is not seen: the Word and promises of God. As sinners, we in our fallen, sin-filled state are the “nothing” out of which God's Word creates new and holy people! No scientific; no medical test; no physical implement can look at you and actually see or grab ahold of your “saved-ness” or your essence as a “holy child of God”. But faith does. Faith grabs that irrefutable and authoritative Word of God and holds onto it through the “nothing” that is our sinful and fallen lives.

✘ Colossians 2:13-14 describes how that conversion comes about; how that bridge back to God is built. It says, “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

→ Yes, God alone built this indestructible bridge of faith upon the very physical and very real body and blood of His Son Jesus when He gave it up freely in our place on the cross. And now it is in God's powerful water-and-word gift of baptism that you and I have been physically connected to the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. It is not just some ethereal, symbolic connection that we imagine we have in baptism folks! No, in that sacred act you actually died. Your sinful nature, along with its condemning power was drowned. And at the same time you were physically joined to Jesus and His victory over death when He rose from the tomb on Easter morning so that you actually were “born again” – not into death as before, but into everlasting life with Jesus Christ.

→ When John 1:12-13 speaks of the purpose for Jesus coming into the world it speaks to this and connects it now to the fact that our faith in Jesus is not something that we do; not something we bring about on our own – it too is a gift from God. John 1:12-13 says, “But to all who did receive [Jesus], who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God”.

Martin Luther said of this passage, “These words are [John's] confutation, as it were, to all those who lay claim to anything within themselves of which they may boast. However good or rich it may be, or however much of it there may be, it contributes nothing toward becoming a child of God” (*Luther's Works* AE vol. 22, pg. 90).

✘ So, this is a picture of how you and I and anyone else comes to faith: 1) God calls us by His Word, 2) we do nothing but hear and passively receive that Word, 3) The proclamation that Christ has died for our sins is delivered to us and that Gospel truth pulls us out of the nothingness of our sin to new life, and 4) building for us God's bridge of grace, upon which we 5) walk and live – now using the gift of faith that confidently grabs and holds onto Jesus against any and all odds and temptations and false arguments that the devil and this world might try to throw our way.

→ This is the image that Ephesians 6:16 uses when it describes and urges us all to take up and use the armor of Christ that God has given us in baptism. In verse 16 we are urged, "In all circumstances" to "take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one".

→ Those darts, dear friends are shot at you from a host of different earthly soldiers who belong to Satan. It might be from your next door neighbor, or your employer, or a co-worker. They might come from those you think you can trust, like your best friend or a teacher or professor at school, or a doctor – anyone who speaks or acts or tries to get you to speak or act in a manner that denies the truth of God's Word and seeks to break down that bridge to God and re-open the divide of sin and unbelief. And trust me, if you haven't already figured it out, the devil's supply of fiery lies and deceptions and troubles and griefs in this earthly existence seems to be endless.

✘ Yet the preacher shows us, through the lives of our forefathers in the faith, that God's shield of faith can and does protect us until Jesus returns and/or we are taken in victory to His side in Paradise.

→ For example in verses 8-12 he uses the story of Abraham where we see that faith protected him and brought about good works and obedience. Abraham was a "nothing"; so was Sarah. They did not even know where they were going when they left the country of Haran at God's command. Yet faith worked inside of Abraham to trust God's Word and so be led to obey and follow the Lord's calling and go up to Canaan and live in tents.

→ Abraham didn't know how he would survive or where he would end up. And yet when God said, "Go", Abraham believed God and went. That obedience in the face of earthly uncertainty is a result of faith.

→ God's Word pulled Abraham out of his nothingness to a new and exciting – yes even challenging and difficult life at times. But it was a new life with God; a life that involved obedience and good works that he had never considered before following God.

### **III. God calls us to follow him to the promised land.**

✘ Each mention of an Old Testament believer, whether it was Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham or Sarah, is introduced with the phrase "by faith". God's work of faith is credited with the accomplishments that are listed for each person.

→ This is a powerful illustration of the Biblical truth that your works are not something you give to God apart from or in addition to faith. By God's grace, faith saves us completely and totally by giving us the ability to grasp God's Word. God speaks His saving Word that creates you and me as God's children out of nothing and it's His gift of faith that hears and latches onto that Word.

→ This faith that trusts in and relies on the creative Word of God is what then produces good works. The preacher points us to see just some of the key Old Testament saints and the way that God "commended" (v 2) them for using the shield of faith in following God.

- ⊗ Each one of them, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah are commended for their faith and their trust in God. It was not the person him/herself, but the God-empowered shield of faith inside of them that led them to follow God; to be righteous and obedient.
  - ➔ Yes, the trials and tribulations they endured were different, but they each had them – some of them in immense degrees. Still, each one finally endured in faith to the end of his/her journey and received God’s promised peace and eternal joy.
- ⊗ Like those pillars of faith, so each one of us here has nothing of our own to show God; no righteousness we have made or earned. Yet God calls us by the Gospel and gives us His new life of righteousness forever.
  - ➔ He fills us with the Holy Spirit and we live by His power, following our Lord and His leading until He brings us in the end to the Promised Land of heaven. As verses 13-16 describe it, we Christians are strangers and exiles here in this sin-infected world. But through faith in Christ, we know for certain that God is guiding us through this life to our home in the eternal presence of the One who created all things, including us, from nothing, to be with Him in His glory forevermore.

## **Conclusion**

- ⊗ Nothing is a pretty bad place to be. Having nothing is no fun. Being a nothing is even worse. But out of nothing our God has created a better place for us, a Promised Land where all our sins are gone and full joy awaits us.
  - ➔ Though we can’t physically see it with our eyes right now or touch it with our hands, we know it and we believe in it and we look forward to it with every fiber of our being, in God’s gift of faith. Amen.