I want to talk to you today about faith — and the power of faith. Certainly it is a primary concept in all religion — in all of life for that matter. We live by faith perforce — our very language is loaded with references to it. Take the word credit, from the Latin “I believe” (credo), or the word confidence, from the Latin “with a faith,” and consider how, well we would be able to manage without credit, or confidence, or perhaps confidence in our credit rating. Interestingly enough, the Greek word for faith is found in a technical philosophical term, epistemology, which means the theory of knowledge. But not every philosopher realizes knowledge is based on faith, nor every scientist. There is a relation — Paul Tillich has contrasted the methods of science and religion thus: Science is a method of doubt based on faith, a fundamental faith in the rational order of the universe that lets us find the truth. But religion is a method of faith based on doubt, the awful awareness that there may be no fundamental meaning or order to the world at all. Faith is not a serene spirit necessarily. It is the gold forged in the crucible of life. And there can be doubt at the heart of faith. After all, those great heroes of faith cited in the scripture reading all died in faith, not having received the promises. Surely their faith cannot have been all that serene.

The gospel of Mark tells of a father who brought his son to Jesus to be healed. Jesus tells him all things are possible to him who believes and the father replies “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” We are like that man. Our faith flickers in the winds of adversity. It might help to be clearer as to what faith is. But what is it? What does it mean to have faith?

There is an old schoolboy definition. Faith is believing what you know ain’t so. And there is a shade of truth in this. And so we seek to undergird it with reasons and arguments. But reason doesn’t persuade unbelievers, and the certitude of faith transcends the certainties of reason, and, besides, if faith were achieved through reason, what merit would there be in faith? Sometimes we speak of the obedience of faith - and faith surely involves some sense of faithfulness. But it is doubtful if faith can be willed or demanded directly. The command, “have faith,” can sound pretty hollow. Again, faith seems to suggest a kind of feeling or emotion. Schleiermacher called it the feeling of absolute dependence. To which Hegel commented, then of all creatures the dog must be most religious because of his absolute dependence on man. That’s not quite fair - but then, faith must be more than an emotion.

The dialectic between faith and doubt is interesting. One way of putting it is this: “Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is possible. And as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance.” This definition is one given by William James, the great American psychologist, philosopher. But it reflects the spirit of the heroes of faith cited in Hebrews who dared much and wrought much by their belief in a vision of God, a “city yet unseen.” The heroes of the Bible did what they did by faith. And it is faith which enables us to move mountains of
cares and it is faith that helps us face our Gethsemenes. What is it? Faith in God is certainly more than believing God exists. If I believe in you — this surely means more than knowing you exist. What is it? A creed? A dogma? A belief? A trust? Sense of security? Sense of adventure? A commitment?

Let us turn to the Bible for our answer. Let us turn to that first verse of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews where we find what is indeed a rarity in the Scriptures — a definition of a key theological term. The revised translation reads — “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The King James reads — “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” The Greek word, in my view, support the King James version. The word translated substance is hypostasis which means that which stands under something to give it its support, reality — the Latin substantia is a literal rendering of the Greek. Faith gives substance to things hoped for - This then is the great fact about faith. Faith makes a reality of hopes, gives substance to hopes. Faith realizes. Faith brings about its own verification. Faith gives substance, reality, to things hoped for. Faith has real effects. Faith works. This is an awesome fact about faith.

William James was concerned to defend the role of faith in an age which was beginning to say, only science can give us truth and it is wrong to believe anything which is not proved first by science. He argued that belief must and does outstrip scientific evidence, that there is a certain class of truths of whose reality faith is a factor, that as regards this class of truths faith is not only licit, and pertinent, but essential and indispensable. The truths cannot become true until our faith has made them so. And he gives a vivid example of what he means. I quote him directly:

“Suppose, for example, that I am climbing in the Alps, and have had the ill-luck to work myself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Being without similar experience, I have no evidence of my ability to perform it successfully; but hope and confidence in myself make me sure I shall not miss my aim, and I nerve my feet to execute what without those subjective emotions would perhaps have been impossible. But suppose that, on the contrary, the emotions of fear and mistrust preponderate, or suppose that . . . I feel it would be sinful to act upon an assumption unverified by previous experience, — why then I shall hesitate so long that at last, exhausted and trembling, and launching myself in a moment of despair, I miss my foothold and roll into the abyss. In this case (and it is one of an immense class) the part of wisdom clearly is to believe what one desires; for the belief is one of the indispensable preliminary conditions of the realization of its object. There are then cases where faith creates its own verification. Believe, and you shall be right, for you shall save yourself; doubt, and you shall again be right, for you shall perish. The only difference is that to believe is greatly to your advantage.”

This does not mean, of course, that the movements of the stars or the facts of history are affected by my belief. These are fixed independent of my wishes. But in every situation which involves some contribution on my part, some energy which in turn calls for some faith on my part, then we have a right to believe in the realization of our hopes and our faith can make it so. Faith works. Believing makes it so. And when we stop to think about it, we see it is so. Suppose we are facing a difficult situation — we can trust we will find the strength to endure, and somehow we
do so, or we can panic and fulfill our own prophecy that we cannot possibly face up to the situation. We are called to do a hard job, for example, to take some leadership role. We can believe that we cannot possibly handle it, and convince ourselves this is the case, or we can consider we must have the ability (or people wouldn’t have asked us) and commit ourselves to a successful effort. We can believe others are friends and find them so. Or we can be suspicious of everyone and find ourselves thinking when someone says “Good morning” — “I wonder what he meant by that.” We can believe in ourselves, our strengths and prospects or we can believe there is no good thing in us at all. Believing will make it so. We can believe in future possibilities or believe our creative lives are effectively over. Believing will make it so. We can believe the cup of our life is half empty or still half full. Where the power of conviction counts and it does so in a vast area of our lives, belief brings about its own justification. Faith does indeed outrun knowledge. Says Santayana

Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine

That lights the pathway but one step ahead

Across the void of mystery and dread.

Bid then the tender light of faith to shine

By which alone the mortal heart is led

Into the thinking of the thought divine.

We have been talking about the power of faith, the sheer power of conviction. But so awesome is this that the power of conviction slides into the conviction of power. Believing makes it so. But is there no limit to this? In Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass Alice at one point is told something outrageous by the White Queen. “I can’t believe that,” says Alice. “But of course you can,” says the Queen. “You haven’t been practicing — just close your eyes, and try very hard. You can believe anything you want to believe.” The power of conviction becomes the conviction of power. But this can have demonic as well as divine directions. The power of conviction can cure the drift, the becalmed meaninglessness of our lives, but the conviction of power can drive us into the shoals of destruction if we commit ourselves to the wrong beliefs.

“To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men — that is genius.” So wrote Emerson in his essay Self-Reliance, but to believe that what is true for you is true for all men “can be fanaticism as well. And this is the spirit of our age. Think of all the appeals to the spirit of fanaticism in our time. The commitment to cults of all kinds can give one a sense of power — but it can result in the pitiful and obscene spectacle of a Jonestown. There are the committed terrorist groups convinced that their tactics of murder will bring power to their side. And our conviction of power in our commitment to modern technology — without the direction of a larger purpose — leads us to ecological disasters. There is the faith of the humanist who believes man is the measure of all things, sufficient unto himself, man who believes he alone made himself what he is (and he tends to worship his maker), that he is the
captain of his soul, the master of his fate. When all the old gods we worshiped seem to disappear we try to believe in ourselves alone, our strengths, our energies, our own values and try pathetically to assert ourselves. This is the phenomenon of the me-generation - with its proliferation of books all designed to gratify the self, express the self, assert the self (and manipulate others in the process), enjoy the self. But the result seems to be more loneliness, more desperation, more despair, and saddest of all — when one has turned away from God, he has no one to whom to pray.

We have often heard it said, the trouble with our age is its lack of faith. It were truer to say the trouble with our age is the demonic proliferation of faith, too many faiths, too much faith in the wrong things. The greatest temptation today is not to live without faith but rather to live by faith in less than the highest — to believe in our powers, or money, or pleasure, or whatever, to give us a meaning in life.

And this, of course, is what is wrong with William James’ psychological — pragmatic approach to faith. It is not a total commitment. It does not involve what Tillich calls ultimate concern. The will to believe must be a response to the highest — in traditional terms it is given by grace. Otherwise the will to believe is just willfulness. This is what explains the early disciples’ leaving their fishing nets in response to Jesus’ invitation, “to come, follow me” to become fishers of men. Of course the call may not be this dramatic. The church-related college has traditionally seen it as a commitment to service and to excellence as an educational goal — not as training for a higher income bracket. And we can respond to that invitation, that ideal and commit ourselves to the highest.

Faith is an awesome thing. It is the power of conviction and the conviction of power. But it demands a mighty object, the mightiest of all, all-mighty God. We cannot have faith in the wrong things — we cannot believe in just anything. We must live by faith in the highest if we are to endure as the heroes of faith of long ago.

We must realize anew what our heritage teaches us. That there is a God in Israel — that He demands righteousness of us. We need not look blindly about for meaning to our lives. God calls us thru His love to share in His creative power, to work for creative goodness, to struggle against destructive evil. And the measure of his love tells us what is good and what is evil. The Bible teaches us that God is in history working with his people to bring good out of evil, to work for the kingdom of God, to move toward true freedom and happiness for all the children of God. And we must have faith in the power of His infinite goodness.

Faith is a mighty power in life — it demands a mighty object it demands God. Faith demands a solid foundation, something that is the same, yesterday, today and forever — it demands God. Faith demands a transcendent purpose — it demands the good, the noble, the true, the beautiful in life —it demands God. Without the vision of God our faith is too narrow, our hopes too limited, our love too strained — our God too small.

Not so for the heroes of faith mentioned in our Scripture. It is by faith that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sojourning in the land of promise, dwelt in tents, insecure habitations, but they looked for
a city with foundations whose builder and maker is God — wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. By faith Enoch, by faith Noah, by faith Moses, by faith Joseph — the litany of faith goes on — all united by the vision of God. And although they did not receive the promise, God providing some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect — they lived by faith. And so may it be with us. May we live by faith in the highest — faith in God, and dare much and do much in His name.