When I have a day off, one thing that I sometimes enjoy is watching stand up comedy. One guy I think is always interesting to watch was George Carlin. Just this week I was watching some interviews with him in the last year of his life, around December 2007. Even off stage and speaking "from the heart," he still had a comedian's wit and charm. You could always count on him to critique every institution of American life. He believed that the popular idea of "saving the planet" was a complete joke. In more colorful language, he George says that the planet will be fine, it's the people who are in trouble. He takes mass human extinction in the relatively near future as a matter of course.

George takes Jesus to task, and says that it’s not a question of serving God OR Mammon, but actually both are the problem. He understands religious faith as being afraid of an angry invisible man in the sky. Faith is barbaric, bronze age superstition and nothing more. Equally fierce is his critique on American greed, and the need of “keeping up with the Jones.” (He’s got a truck – do you see his truck! I’m getting a bigger one!” He’s not impressed with what he sees as lip service changes, like not using straws or recycling. We have to change ourselves, but we’re never going to do that, because everyone wants a dollar and a toy. And that’s George’s diagnosis; religious faith poisoning our mind while consumer greed poisons our lives and world. And where does that leave him? What is his conclusion?
Ultimately, he says that he’s become an observer, with no stake in the outcome. The world is a freak show, and in America, you get a front row seat! The world is going down in flames, so we might as well sit back and have a laugh at the absurdity of it all!

I have sympathy for cynics who share George Carlin’s views, for they are not by any means unreasonable. There’s no shortage of negative news, which often seems to outweigh positive news both in scope and scale, particularly when talking about the environment. And if you go looking, it is not hard to find examples of the shadow side of religious faith and practice in history and in our own time. There is just no shortage of scary prospects from global warming, or rising wealth in equality, or automation displacing workers, nuclear proliferation, the destruction of our oceans and forests, mass shootings, a rapidly increasing global human population, or any number of other things! A cynic like George Carlin is many things, but unreasonable is not one of them!

Ironically, George is right in line with Jesus’ teaching regarding our obsession with money, and shiny trinkets and gadgets! It is a wonderful thing to hear Jesus’ teaching reflected back, knowingly or unknowingly, by people of other faiths or of no faith. I will, of course, have to take our cynic comedian to task on his critique of religious faith. I will concede to George that there are surely sometimes people who may do the right thing only out of fear of punishment from God, and for no other reason. However, that is quite low hanging fruit. When cynics like George describe Christian faith as thinking that there is an invisible man in the sky who sometimes grants wishes, they are committing a straw man fallacy. That’s where you build up a
straw man (Christian faith is this obviously stupid thing) and then attack the straw man that you built up, rather than taking seriously a more complete picture of what Christian faith is about.

This Sunday begins the first of four Sundays of epistle readings from the Letter to the Hebrews. Today's passage, beginning in chapter 11, offers one of the clearest scripturally based definitions for what “faith” is. The NRSV renders the first verse, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Now the cynic, whether external in a comedian like George, or internal in our own minds, is quick to respond: “See! Conviction of things not seen! There’s a word for that; gullible!” Let’s briefly explore a fuller understanding of what today's lection teaches us about the essence of Christian faith, and we will see that faith, as God’s gift to us, is something much more profound than the cynic envisions.

Let me begin first with the theological point. Scholars suggest that the opening sentence that we read as “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,” could also be rendered in English “Faith gives substance to things hoped for.” In other words, through faith Christians experience in their present lives a glimpse of God’s promised future. The model for faith that the author today’s scripture is using is actually God’s creation of the world! Just as God spoke the Word in the beginning, and brought about the World from non-existence, so too is God’s Word active in the heart of each believer, bring into existence something which did not exist before.

Now, we might rightly think, what does that actually look like in the life of a person? Here we are given the example of Abraham. Abraham gives us the model of faith a trust, trusting in God is eternally faithful. Why Abraham? Not only is he the
great patriarch of the faith, but because his life of seeking God’s will is one of following without knowing the destination. God called Abraham out from his homeland, to follow somewhere he had no idea where he was going. Our scripture today is giving us the journey of a man’s lifetime from the known into the unknown as a model for faith. This is a far cry removed from Carlin’s critique about a man in the sky who might grant wishes! Abraham himself never came to inherit the land that God promised. Abraham was living into a story that was larger than his own. Abraham, by faith, followed God’s call on his life even when it didn’t “make sense,” and did not seem supported by the facts on the ground around him.

“The conviction of things not seen,” takes a broader view of both God and the world than the cynic will allow. Cynicism and pessimism, while presenting themselves as 100% rational and reasonable, are in reality lenses that are adopted. They are ways of seeing the world. Faith is always a way to see the world, but through a different lens. Though we do not always “see” confirmation of our faith in the immediate world around us, as the horrors and brutality of the world have remained with us from Jesus’ time to our own, we, by faith, embark on a new way of seeing. Through the gift of faith, we strive to see the world as Christ did. We give, we love, we forgive, and we pray for those who trouble us and even for those who persecute us. Seeing the world through the lens of Faith doesn’t mean that persecution will stop or that there will be peace just because we are peaceful. We are peaceful anyway. Having faith doesn’t mean that we will be forgiven just because we forgive. We forgive anyway. Having faith doesn’t mean that we will be loved just because we love. And we love anyway. Our faith is in God, whose
faithfulness is not merely future, but eternal. Our faith is in God, who was always faithful to Abraham, who led Abraham not to a mere earthly destination, but on a journey that spanned a lifetime with a purpose larger than he could have imaged at the outset. Ultimately, we are all pilgrims here on earth, and none of us knows with complete certainty where God is leading us. And, to Carlin's dismay, we trust in God anyway! I pray we all uphold one another in keeping the faith! Amen.