

8-10-25 Sermon: “By Faith” – Hebrews 11

The Letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage Christians who have grown weary in living out their faith. And I’m glad that the lectionary takes us to Hebrews today because, I don’t know about you, but I, too, am growing weary.

We don’t know much about the first readers of Hebrews. From the letter itself, we can deduce that they are second-generation Christians, who did not know Jesus personally, and that they are enduring some sort of hardship. Maybe they’re being persecuted, maybe there’s division or infighting in their community. Whatever the hardship, there seems to be no end in sight, and the Hebrews are about ready to give up on this little experiment called Christianity.

I can identify with these Christians, living through adversity, ready to give up. Maybe you can, too. It is *hard* to keep doing what is right, day in and day out, when so much in the world around us is going so horribly wrong. It is infuriating to keep turning the other cheek when your enemy has no problem hitting you again, and again, and again. It is demoralizing, speaking truth to power, when those in power have no interest in truth, or justice, or the general welfare. For American Christians in 2025, it doesn’t require much imagination for us to empathize with the readers of Hebrews, does it?

The author writes to these beleaguered believers and urges them to persevere. To stay the course, keep running the race, even when they can’t see the finish line. And they will be able to do this, the author promises, because they are fueled by something called...faith.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,” he writes, “the conviction of things not seen.” And with that introduction, the author launches into a 37-verse litany recounting the faith of the spiritual ancestors: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses... All these heroes who were willing to trust in the unknown, to believe in a future they could not yet see, to remain faithful even when they did not live to see the promises realized. Have faith, the author writes. Have faith.

Now here is where the author of Hebrews and I part ways. I’ll admit to being skeptical – maybe even a little jaded – but I am pretty burnt out on this *faith* thing. Life happens – sometimes it’s good; sometimes it’s bad – but when it comes to faith... I don’t know, I’m just not feeling it. And when I’m going through a hard time, the absolute last thing I want is for someone to come up to me with a cheery smile and say, “It’ll all be ok; have faith!” Back away slowly, and no one gets hurt...

At best, the admonition to have faith feels like a platitude; at worst, it feels like a way to blame someone for their own troubles... “*Well, I guess she didn’t have enough faith.*” So I’m struggling here, Hebrews: Where is your good news for weary people? What good is faith, and what does faith even look like in times like these? So I decided to do a little deep dive, to investigate how our culture understands “faith” and how that compares to its Biblical definition.

So, first reaction: When you hear the word faith, what’s the first thing that pops into your mind?

Popular culture talks about faith as a belief and as a feeling. *[Smile]* But that’s not quite how faith is described in Scripture.

Let’s start with belief.

We Protestants *love* to talk about what we believe! We’ve got creeds – “I believe in God the Father Almighty”; we’ve got confessions of faith; we’ve got denominations; we tell people where they fit, if they’re in or out, depending on what they do – or don’t! – believe.

But is belief...faith? Not quite, or at least, not according to Jesus.

Jesus has plenty to say about faith. He tells his disciples that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed they could move mountains. When Peter walks on the water and then gets scared and sinks, Jesus asks him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” But Jesus is not concerned here with Peter’s belief; he is concerned with something a little bit different, and that is *trust*.

It’s slight and subtle, the difference between belief and trust. But I think it matters here. It’s the difference between, “Do you believe that a mountain can move?” and “Do you trust that the God revealed in Jesus Christ will move mountains, if that’s what it takes, to redeem the world?”

The faith to which Jesus calls us is not belief...but trust. We believe...in statements. In facts, in concepts. We trust...in people. In relationships. So perhaps having faith is not believing that things will work out or go our way, but rather trusting in God to be good. Trusting in God to be God.

The Apostle Paul also has a lot to say about faith. He’s the one the theologians like to quote: “We are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.” And again, we Protestants love this stuff! We say things like this all the time: We receive salvation not because of what we do, or how good we are, but through our faith in Jesus Christ...Except.

Except. Except that might not be what Paul is saying. What if I told you that there are *two* ways to translate the Greek words Paul uses – *pisteos Christou* – the words we’ve been taught mean “faith in Christ”? What if I told you that because of the way subjects and objects and verb tenses work in Greek, it is possible that Paul is saying we are saved by “faith *in* Christ.” But it is *just as possible* that Paul is telling us that we are saved by “the faith *of* Christ,” or perhaps better put, “the *faithfulness* of Christ.”

Could it be, you think, that our salvation comes, not from what we think, feel, or believe, but from of Jesus’ faithfulness, his willingness to follow God to the end? Doesn’t that sound more like something God would do than making salvation dependent on our own thoughts and feelings?

Trust. And faithfulness. Friends, if *this* is the faith to which Hebrews is commending us, then maybe I *can* get on board. Because this faith is not something we feel or believe, this faith is something we *do*. Not a feeling we experience, but a discipline we cultivate.

I appreciate this kind of faith because it does not ask us to deny the difficulties of the world as it is. It doesn’t ask us to believe something we may struggle to believe or to feel a confidence we certainly don’t feel. It simply asks us to follow Jesus. To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

And like with any discipline, sometimes we just have to *do* faith, whether we’re feeling it or not. Sometimes, we just put one foot in front of the other, and we make the road by walking. We choose to trust. We choose to act. We choose to be faithful.

And when we grow weary – which we will – we can look around. Look at this great cloud of witnesses that runs with us. Actually, do it. Look around at one another. These are your companions on the journey. The great cloud of witnesses.

Let’s put one foot in front of the other and run this race.