



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 9 – Proper 14 Year C

By Faith

[RCL]: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

By faith... by faith... by faith... These words pulse through today's epistle like a heartbeat, *lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub*. (It also works in Greek, the language the letter was originally written in—a single, two-syllable word we translate “by faith.” It sounds like *pist-ay*). “By faith our ancestors received... by faith we understand... by faith Abraham obeyed... by faith he stayed... by faith he received.” If we add in the verses our lectionary reading skips today, we would hear even more: *By faith . . . by faith . . . by faith . . .* like the rhythm within us that keeps us alive.

We don't know who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews. But what we can tell from reading the whole letter and hearing its concerns is that it's written to people who are giving up, who are leaving the church, who are leaving the faith. It's written to people who have made sacrifices for their faith, who have even endured suffering, but now, these people are growing weary. It was hard enough in the short term—they can't see staying in it for the long haul. They can only see what's immediately in front of them, and they don't like it. They think they can get a better deal somewhere else. So, Hebrews is the sermon of a preacher to people who are heading out the door.

This is the preacher's message: Don't give up. Have faith. Trust. Jesus Christ is the one in whom we can hope. Jesus Christ is the one in whom we can trust. Jesus Christ is the one in whom we can place our faith because Jesus Christ is faithful. You have not seen the future, but Jesus holds the future. Have faith in Jesus because Jesus is the faithful one.

This is why the writer's *by faith... by faith... by faith...* is more like the rhythm of a heartbeat than the pulse of repeated pushups.

The analogy of practice and commitment—*okay, give me five more! You've got this!*—like in exercise may be helpful. It matters that we show up. It matters that we keep giving it another try. It matters that we keep at it even if our efforts seem tiny and all we experience in the short term is how tired our arms are.

But instead of thinking of faith as an accomplishment, something done by our own efforts and through gritted teeth, think of it more like openness, like acceptance, like receiving something life-giving and empowering because it's Jesus' faith and faithfulness that really matters. In baptism, we are connected to Jesus' faith and faithfulness. In baptism we receive Jesus. We are baptized into his death. And if we are united with Jesus in a death like his, we will be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6:5). Whether the trust that is faith comes easy to us or feels like it takes great exertion, we all receive the same strong Jesus. Jesus is enough to carry us into a future that is unseen by us.

Think about being on an airplane. Some people who travel by plane are confident flyers. Others are not. But here's the thing: all you have to do is get on the plane. That's your responsibility. Get on the plane and behave kindly to the people around you. You can be a relaxed passenger or a nervous passenger, but what really matters is the ability of the pilot. You can be utterly undaunted by turbulence, or you can hunker down and eat your little packet of pretzels like it's your last meal, but what matters is the training and experience of the pilot. The pilot is the same for the calm and reassured as well as the nervous and fearful. But confident passengers have a much better experience during the journey.

Our epistle writer's *by faith... by faith... by faith...* is encouragement to stick with the community of Christians and to stick with Jesus Christ, to trust that by living with willing hearts, hearts open to the future God has prepared, like our forebears in faith did, we too become inheritors of that future, a future better than anything we can ask for or imagine.

It's Jesus' faith that makes the difference. Our faith in Jesus, our confidence in Jesus lets us do things we couldn't do otherwise. What Jesus did for us, what Jesus does for us, and our sometimes tiny, mustard seed-sized faith that connects us to him, means we can hope, serve, enjoy. Jesus can see a future we can't, but we can look for, prepare for, and do our part for. Jesus made a future for us that we couldn't make for ourselves.

Yes, we cannot see the future, but God in Jesus has made a future that awaits us and it's that future that forms us and can inform our present if we let it. Yes, we cannot see the future, but in Jesus, God shows us a future of which Jesus is the first fruits, the first of those living fully a resurrection life, a life marked by love and meaning and possibility and peace beyond death. Stick with Jesus.

And stick with the church. The church is a place where we practice and see faith, faith that relies on the promises of God and the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, faith that stands on the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. We see that there is faith that reconciles marriage partners, even after infidelity. There is faith that rebuilds relationships, even after heartbreak. There is faith that endures and carries people through incredible physical suffering and pain. There is faith that allows people to give up addictions and ask for help. There is faith that makes people keep showing up to care for children others would leave behind, faith that asks for forgiveness, faith that reconciles, faith that changes lives. Even a little bit of faith, even a little bit of openness, even a little bit of seeking and acknowledging God

can lead to hope and joy and strength and peace and a future we cannot yet see, but of which we can be assured and confident.

Phillips Brooks said it this way, “I beg you to live far-looking lives. Lift up your eyes and see the places afar off. You may not see all the way between, but keep your eyes forward still. The present cannot be known or done except by the future’s interpretation and inspiration. And no [one] can know the future rightly except as [they know] it in Him who is the Lord of all our lives, ‘Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and forever.’”¹

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¹ Phillips Brooks, *The More Abundant Life*, readings selected by W. M. L. Jay (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1902), 142.