

We're still in the book of Hebrews and all I can think about this morning is the joke of he-brews some coffee. I had to do that at least once.

You'll remember that Hebrews was written for a group of weary followers of Christ. They were weary, ready to give up, tired of the difficulties around them, wondering if their hope put in this Jesus—in the Divine—was really worth it. They'd given up their way of life for this Jesus and this—this persecution, this mocking, this hope never fulfilled—seemed like a bit of a bad trade perhaps.

And I know many of us can relate to that weariness. Some of us are tired too. Wondering if the way of Jesus in this world is worth it, frustrated by the hope that seems to never come through

How do we even put one foot in front of the other? It's into that kind of weariness the preacher of Hebrews speaks.

If you remember from last week, we began reading the beginning of Hebrews 11. And it starts by saying this:

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”  
(vs1)

Following Jesus we do hope for things.

We do have convictions about what is not yet seen.

We hope that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven  
That evil will be done away with and justice and healing and fruit of the spirit will roll down like rivers.

We have these promises, we cling to them, we started on the way of Christ because of these promises, because of the message of Christ, and we long for them.

And so we put our faith and hope and conviction in these things. In the way of Christ.

This isn't something we simply we believe with our minds and hearts, but is something we invest our entire lives in. It's hope and assurance and convictions that we bet our entire lives on—we go “all in”. We put skin in the game, put all our stakes on these promises. And then work to make that hope and promise,

with the help of GOD, come true for all. Even when all we see is a little slice of them coming true, we hold on to them.

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At least this is what it seems when you hold this definition of faith against the stories the author tells.

Abraham—living as if the promise to make him into a great nations were true....betting his whole life on it.

Imagine: what would it be like to pack up your family, go somewhere you know nothing about on a hope.....

Moses—living as if the promise of God to free the Israelites from a mighty military power would come true.

Imagine telling a whole group of people to kill their best lamb and paint blood on doorposts.....

The Israelites putting their trust in a promise of crossing the red sea on dry ground....

Imagine being the first person to have to stick your foot in the sea while the waters still raged on....how far would you walk?

The people of God walking circles around the city Jericho on a hope that the promised land God led them to would finally be theirs..

Imagine being the people...walking.

Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and prophets.

Gideon—betting victory in war on a very very small army.

Barak—betting victory on a woman judge's promise.....

Samson—betting the freedom of his people while in prison.

Samuel—hearing the voice of God in the middle of the night.

*We see that these people go all in, they bet their lives on these promises and take the counter-intuitive, seeming ridiculous and definitely not rational action the promise requires of them. This is the life of faith. being invited into a promise and trusting it enough to take action....*

We easily put these heroes of faith on a pedestal. But it's important to remember that this list of heroes of faith could just as easily be a list of "failures of faith"

They, like all of us, made mistakes, took things into their own hands, got hasty and did really horrendous and sometimes evil things. They were saints and sinners. Both.

That is the gift of this list.

We see that a life of faith is not a life of moral perfection, a life lived with no mistakes, or knowing the exact right thing to do every single time.

But a life of faith can be lived by regular people who are mixed with good and evil, mistakes and shining moments, and is simply trusting God's faithfulness, investing our lives in God's promises and taking the seemingly strange actions that these promises require of us. Faith is not just for heroes.

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There's this sneaky sneaky thing the preacher of Hebrews does. He gets us all pumped up in Verses 33-35a.

<sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,<sup>34</sup> quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.<sup>35</sup> Women received back their dead, raised to life again."

This is a list of victories, of miracles, of God's promises kept, of heroic like results that came from faith.

It's beautiful; it's inspiring, it's the things we long for, the healing we hope for, the kingdom coming like we pray for. IT's the hurrah! It's why we bet our lives on this stuff. it's why we put skin in the game.

We want to see the miraculous. Kids' put in loving homes. Kindness in the workplace. The poor fed and lifted out of poverty. People of different races eating at the same table. Churches apologizing for harm done and working to make sure it doesn't happen. Healing and character transformation. And the like.

God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

We are pumped and ready to give our lives to this kingdom. And then the author suddenly and completely turns everything upside down.

Without even taking a breath he launches into this list: (35 b-38)

35“There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.<sup>36</sup> Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.<sup>37</sup> They were put to death by stoning;<sup>[e]</sup> they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—<sup>38</sup> the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.”

This is a disheartening, defeating, discouraging list.

This does not seem like a list of God’s kingdom come.

This is a list of pain, suffering, of hopes not fulfilled, of promises not seemingly kept, of difficulties and persecutions, of death at the hands of evil, of loss and hardship.

Jesus said: pick up your cross and follow me. (Luke 9:23)

Jesus said: if you want to save your life you must lose it for my sake. (Luke 9:24)

Jesus said: I have come to bring a sword. (Matt 10:34)

Jesus said: blessed are you when people persecute you for my sake. (Matt 5:10-12)

*It’s just that when it really happens, we forget that this too is what we signed up for when we invest our lives in the way of Christ.*

This isn’t a list we know a lot about.

We know of the cost of kindness and patience. The way we’ve put our jobs on the line for ethical issues. The ridicule of friends and families and even other Christians when we stick to our values that come from the heart of Christ. We know of the pain of seeking healing, transformation and confession. The loss of comfort when we take a difficult job God led us to.

But we don’t usually know much about death by the sword or stoning or being exiled from families. But many do around the world.

When I was in Egypt...visited this church where they meet every Sunday even after a man came into the church pushing a baby stroller that exploded and killed many women and kids and after 21 of their own were beheaded in Libya. Where people when they convert to Christianity are exiled from their families and who are threatened with death. Where they literally are gunned down while travelling through the countryside.<sup>1</sup>

*Imagine the courage of following the way of Christ needed. What might a life of faith look like and require? What kind of perseverance might be necessary? What might the cost be?*

We see through them and the list provided that the life of faith doesn't always mean we will see God's kingdom come, or that life will be easy or all will be well, or happiness and flourishing of life will be seen in every instance.

Instead it means holding fast to the way of Christ even when it costs us, courage in the face of hardship, resilient hope in the midst of devastation, continuing to walk bit by bit even when it looks like defeat all around.

We were never promised an easy life because of faith. but that Christ, who is all in all, who is the great high priest, who has gone this journey before us would journey again with us. and that somehow mysteriously through our faithfulness and trust would mix with God's faithfulness and the faithfulness of the saints/sinners of the past and slowly bring about God's kingdom.

The thing that both the miraculous and the painful lists have in common says the author:

<sup>39</sup> These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, <sup>40</sup> since God had planned something better for us so *that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

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<sup>1</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015\\_kidnapping\\_and\\_beheading\\_of\\_Copts\\_in\\_Libya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_kidnapping_and_beheading_of_Copts_in_Libya);  
<https://abcnews.go.com/International/coptic-christians-killed-bus-attack-egypt/story?id=58924168>;  
<https://www.christianpost.com/news/egypt-christian-convert-murdered-by-muslim-family-over-facebook-post.html>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38280627>

The work of God, the promises of God, God's kingdom come, perfection of the work and our lives does not come simply on our own but through the community...through us carrying on the work of those who were here before us and those who will be here after us.

Like the third generation farmer who's great grandparents' homesteaded the land and you carry on the work.

Like the tree farmer who cuts down the trees the generation before them planted and is planting the trees for the next generation to harvest.

Like John Lewis, the man who just died in the US who stood in the line of the slave abolitionists and sat at counters and whose work is now being continued by the next generation of Black Americans.

Or as the "Oscar Romero prayer" says:

*"It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is the Lord's work....*

*We plant seeds that one day will grow.*

*We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.*

*....We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.*

*This enables us to do something and to do it very well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,*

*a step along the way,*

*an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.....*

*Nothing we do is complete,*

*which is another way of saying*

*that the Kingdom always lies beyond us."*

There always comes a point when running or hiking that I want to quit. Just lay down and not get back up. Others must encourage us up the mountain. And I think that's true when we follow the way of Christ. There's a moment we want to give

up. The finish line is never in-sight. The goal is never completed. But the author says this:

Now that we've considered the life of faith so many before us have lived.

“since we have this great cloud of witnesses let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with *perseverance* the race marked out for us”

The life of faith calls us each to different tasks, it invites us into unique actions as a community but also as individuals. I do not know what God has been inviting you to do....only you do. Or have sensed what it might be.....(?)

But when you get tired and weary, questioning why you began running in the first place, troubled by what you're seeing, frustrated about what is outside your control, discouraged by the way the kingdom never seems to be in view. Remember: it was always going to get hard at some point. There was always going to be a moment of shame, of bearing your cross, of having to lose your life to gain it.

Remember! The stadium is filled to the brim with people who've run the race before us. and they are cheering us on as we do the work set before us! Even as we stumble and fall, as we stop to walk the last mile, they keep encouraging us on.

So look to them as a witness. Carry on their work, shape/correct/reform it if necessary. Let us continue working to bring the healing of all things, God's kingdom on earth as in heaven.

And remember, it's not always victory, fireworks and jelly beans. We will not always accomplish what we set out to do, we may find ourselves enduring a cross, being shamed and in great fear.

The race....the vision, the dream, the hope, the thing God has prepared—this kingdom which will come to earth and be done on earth as it is in heaven, this hope and confidence you bet your life on back when—it's still worth it.

For the God who promised it to us is faithful! And will be with us to the end.