



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Good . . . The Bad . . . The Faithful
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

Although we call the book of Hebrews an epistle—that is, a letter—it is actually more of a sermon. We know very little about the author, who was not the Apostle Paul as tradition holds. Whoever wrote this sermon was Greek and addressed it to Greek-speaking believers. To whatever first century congregations it was delivered, it is clearly a sermon intent on encouraging followers of Jesus.

Most of us like the eleventh chapter of Hebrews because it defines and illustrates faith. You probably know those words by heart: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1).

Chapter 11 stretches for thirty-nine verses as the Preacher gives us example after example of faithful people. He (or she) mentions Abel whose offering pleased God though it angered his brother Cain to the point of homicide. Enoch, who was snatched up to heaven, is mentioned along with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Other heroes of the faith who are given a shout out are Moses’ parents (who hid him in a basket on the river), Moses (who led his people to freedom and on to the Promised Land), the Hebrew people (who crossed the Red Sea and navigated the desert), and Rahab (who helped the Hebrew spies). The names of Gideon, Barak, Sampson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets are all thrown in for good measure.

The preacher wants to go on but realizes his congregation is getting antsy—perhaps it is nearly noon! Nevertheless, before winding up, he reminds them of the hardships, torture, struggles, and even death that were endured by their faithful spiritual forebearers. And, for the clincher to that point in the sermon, the preacher reminds everyone that none of these folks fully received the promise of their faith here on earth. They did not get what they hoped for, believed in, and lived for during this life. Still, they remained faithful, believing God would one day fulfill the promise of the Gospel which is eternal life with God.

Hebrews is a book of the Bible you want to read when you are weary or discouraged or ready to give up on God or the people of God. It reminds us of who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do among us. The benediction to this sermon alone is inspiring and worth remembering:

Now may the God of peace,
who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus,
the great shepherd of the sheep,
by the blood of the eternal covenant,
make you complete in everything good
so that you may do his will,
working among us that which is pleasing in his sight,
through Jesus Christ,
to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The book of Hebrews exhorts us to remain faithful no matter what, to trust God in all things, and to honor Christ with our lives. It keeps us focused on the goodness and importance of faith.

If our Bible consisted of Hebrews alone, we might get the story and the message, but we would miss so many important details. If we relied upon the book of Hebrews alone, we would never fully understand what keeping faith meant to God's people.

Abraham, who trusted God enough to take his family and all of his possessions into an unknown land, actually struggled with his faith from time to time. He nearly got himself and the Pharaoh into big trouble by not claiming Sarah as his wife. (She was also his half sister.) At several points he nearly gave up on the promise of a son, going so far as to use his wife's handmaid as a surrogate mother. When Isaac was finally born, Abraham treated Hagar and Ishmael badly and God was not at all pleased.

Isaac, the Son of Promise, was never quite on top of his game. In his old age he was easily duped by his wife and youngest son Jacob who tricked him out of the blessing that was intended for the oldest son, Esau. Hebrews does not tell us all of Jacob's escapades or of the arrogance of his favorite son Joseph who was sold into slavery by his older brothers. We do not hear about Moses' reluctance to speak to Pharaoh on behalf of God or of Moses' frustration with God's provisions and the constant complaining of the people. In Hebrews, we do not learn of the real day-to-day struggles of people who were trying hard to be faithful to God, but not always succeeding.

Nor do we hear in this New Testament sermon God's frustration with his people over their sometimes lack of faithfulness. Earlier we heard Isaiah speak on behalf of God and condemn the ritual practices of his people. In the book of Hebrews, we see a God who is smiling down on his people. As Isaiah's prophesy opens, we see a God who is red-faced with anger, spitting contempt for all of the supposedly good things the people were doing to express their faith in God—things like sacrifices and offerings, festivals and special worship services, even their prayers! As much as the book of Hebrews extols the virtue of faithfulness, the prophesy of Isaiah condemns a lack of faithfulness.

There is a reason that hundreds of years ago people of faith thought that we should hear the good news of Hebrews alongside the bad news of Isaiah. Our fathers and mothers in the faith knew that true faithfulness often exists between the good and the bad.

How I wish I could be more like the people described in the sermon from Hebrews! How I long to be able to keep my eyes on the horizon, knowing where I am headed, steadfast and determined to keep the course even though I may never reach the goal on this side of heaven. Instead, I am far more like the people whom God through Isaiah chastised. I do my best to be faithful, but I do not always get it right. I go to church. I give my tithe. I serve. I bear witness. I want to be in church any time the doors are open. I would have fit well into the religious culture of Isaiah's day because I want to mark every significant event with worship. I want to pray eloquent prayers with beautiful words. I want to dot the "i's" and cross the "t's" of religion each and every day.

Fortunately, the book of Hebrews gives me a "thumbs up"! And fortunately, Isaiah reels me back in. The language of the prophet is far more strident than that of the preacher. Isaiah reports that God says:

I have had enough of your offerings.
I do not delight in what you bring as a gift to me.
Who asked you to do this kind of thing anyway?
Your special services and festivals are a burden that I hate!
I am weary of them.
When you reach for me, I will close my eyes.
When you pray, I will not listen because your motives and desires
are not sincere.

Such harsh words fall heavy on religious people like you and me. We thought God wanted us to do all of these religious things. We thought it was important to be in worship, to give offerings, to mark the special events of life in the presence of God and his people. They are. We are not wrong. That is what God desires, but the problem in Isaiah's day, and sometimes today, is that people were relying on all of the trappings of worship to cover the evil things they were doing the rest of the week. Some of them were taking advantage of other people. To them the poor were a nuisance. Widows and orphans were a burden on the community. Anyone who was vulnerable was fair game for their selfish and unscrupulous ways. As a nation of former slaves, they had forgotten all that God had done for them. As a people blessed by God, they had forgotten that they were supposed to be a blessing to other people. For this reason, their worship and festivals were empty and meaningless.

Thankfully, God did not stop with his condemnation of hollow worship. The prophet continues with this advice from God:

Stop doing things that are evil and do things that are good.
Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.
Come on, let's argue this out.
As sinful as you are, I can make you righteous.
As polluted as your heart is, I can make it pure.
If you do this, then the promise is yours,
and the home you seek will be right where you are now.

What genius and compassion to provide us with good examples of what genuine faith looks like and bad examples of the faithlessness with which we are all too familiar. These two passages help me to better understand the ways in which my faith ebbs and flows.

I certainly don't live each day fully focused on the end-game of faith. I don't always know where I am headed nor do I always choose the right path to get me there. I am faithful but I am not in the league of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the rest of that sacred throng.

On the other hand, I do not think that I am quite as corrupt as the Hebrew people were at times. Nevertheless, I do know that the things I choose to do and the things I fail to do are not pleasing to God. If I use worship to cover over those things, God is not happy. The prophet's point is

not to condemn worship but to challenge the attitude that we can do whatever we want to whomever we want whenever we want as long as we fulfill our obligation to worship God. We all know the reality of that attitude.

The thing is that we are not always as faithful as we want to be or as God calls us to be. Nor are we as corrupt and self-centered as we are capable of being. On most days, we are simply trying to “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

Faith—the faith that is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”—is most often lived in the middle as we vacillate between our lesser and better selves. Especially in these days when we are challenged on every side to declare our faith in terms of how we live together, what we allow or deny, whom we accept or turn away, what is just and right and fair and good, we are hard pressed to choose well each and every time. The ways in which our faith is tested and called upon are challenging and often murky. We should not be able to take in the news of the day without asking ourselves, “What does this issue, this event, this experience, mean for me, a person of faith?”

And when we ask that question of ourselves, how will we answer? It is not always clear. There are a lot of factors which impinge upon us such as family, heritage, upbringing, education, cultural values, economic priorities, social constructs, religious assumptions, personal experiences, and political pressures.

The God of Hebrews reminds us to keep our eyes on the ultimate prize which is what God will ultimately do for us all. That goal is our home which is not of this earth. The God of Isaiah calls on us to live in the moment and be aware of the needs around us. We are expected to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, and take care of the most vulnerable among us.

The God of Isaiah recognizes that we are not yet fit to be included in that honor roll of the faithful; yet, despite our sin and wrongheadedness, we can be a part of that blessed group who also struggled to be faithful, often failed, but prevailed by trusting God and doing well by one another despite the odds to the contrary.

We are the Good . . . the Bad . . . and the Faithful. May we be true to our faith day by day until we receive that promise of an eternal home in the full presence of God. Amen.

August 11, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Our souls swell with joy as we hear such beautiful praise sung to you, O God. We imagine you seated on a glorious throne, surrounded by saints who have gone on before us joining us in joyful song. It is an image that gives us comfort, knowing that you keep watch over us day and night.

It is the knowledge that you walked among us, shared our life, died and rose again that gives us hope, O God. We are grateful that you watch over all that you have created, but are encouraged that you live with us through your Holy Spirit. Thank you for loving us, for caring for us, and for not abandoning us.

These days there seem to be so many things for which we pray. Friends, family, and we suffer with illnesses of the body, mind, and spirit. We know that you provide professional skill and care. We know that you inspire personal attention and support from us all. And we know that you find ways to reassure us that we are not alone in anything that happens to us. We are grateful for these gifts, O God, and pray that together they will move us toward places of healing and wholeness.

We are obviously distressed by the terrible things that take place in our world. Violent attacks, brutal storms, mean-spirited attitudes, and selfish actions have no place in this wonderful world you have given to us and yet they are here. We pray that you will guide us to live in such a way that all that we think and say and do will counter the evil and hurtful experiences of life and leave a trail of goodness and grace. Keep us from partnering with anything that is wrong and forge unbreakable alliances with all that is good.

As we worship this morning and walk through the week ahead, keep us aware that you are with us, O God. Comfort us with the assurance that you love us and grant us the courage to follow wherever you lead. Thank you, O God, for the grace of your nearness through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.