



North Shore  
**Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

## ***“Shifting Our Gaze”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Romans 8: 18-28; Hebrews 10-12 (selected verses)*

*May 17, 2020*

Our second reading today, is drawn from the letter to the Hebrews. Now, the letter to the Hebrews is an interesting one, in that in many ways it is more of a sermon than it is a letter. The last few verses give it a bit of that ‘epistle flavor,’ which is why it falls with the letters in the New Testament, but the reality is that it is really one long argument, an exhortation if you will, for perseverance among the people of God in a time of trial.

We don’t know much of the authorship or audience for this letter, but it is understood that it reflects a timing that is set in the last third of the first century – and that’s key. There are two things going on at that point. First, those were the early years of the persecution of Christians by the Roman establishment. After a horrendous fire broke out in Rome in 64AD, the Emperor of the time, Nero, blamed the fire on the Christians and a horrific wave of persecutions broke out known as the Neronian Persecutions. That became the first of waves of such persecutions that would last centuries. Second, we were now decades beyond the ascension of Jesus, and the early expectation that he would return during their lifetimes had failed to come to fruition. So, in this overall context, Christians are quickly losing heart. The return of Jesus that they pictured wasn’t happening, they were under threat by Roman authorities, and more and more they were fading away from the faith.

That’s the context into which this exhortation is written. It starts with chapters of building blocks of that which God has done before, and through, Jesus, and then it continues into what I suggest are the heart of the argument in chapters 10-12. Now, we’re not going to read them all, but I do want to walk through them each a bit at a time.

It starts in chapter 10:

*Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith...*

It's that line, ‘a true heart in full assurance of faith,’ that really drives things from here. The letter continues on a bit with the confidence we hold in Christ, and it’s in the next chapter that the

author enters into the heart of the argument with that familiar and uplifting exploration of what it is to have faith.:

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

Does that sound at all familiar? Think back to Julie's reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. "*For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope.*"

*...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...hope that is seen is not hope!*

Are you seeing a pattern?

Hebrews goes on:

*2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.*

*4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. 5 By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. 7 By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.*

The letter goes on and on through the list of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, David, Samuel...we could spend the entire time of this sermon simply reading through it. But, what so often gets lost is that what our Bibles create as a break into the next chapter of Hebrews is really the conclusion to this argument that started back in chapter 10.

Remember, we started the argument that if we can enter into this new life that has been opened to us in Jesus, we can clasp on to life's trials with the full assurance of faith. Then we explored what faith is – to trust in God to build an Ark...to walk with God towards the sacrifice on one's own son,...to follow God into the wilderness...the list goes on, and then the letter concludes in chapter 12:

*12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.*

To a community living in fear of persecution – one witnessing the moments of earliest martyrs of our faith – and to a people waning from the delay of that which they thought God was going to

do in Jesus – Hebrews issues this exhortation to stand firm and strong in faith with the confidence of three things:

1. Christ has opened to them a new life that they can live with the full assurance of faith.
2. Faith is trusting that one can weather a flood, risk a life, and part an impassable sea.
3. With that cloud of faithful witnesses surrounding them, and their eyes set on Christ before them, they can run the race and never grow weary and never lose heart.

That, my friends, is the power of hope! *“For in hope we were saved.”* Paul writes, *“Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience... We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”*

I don't know about you, but I cling to those words right now – to this very notion of resting in hope as I grasp onto those unseen promises of faith. These are times of unprecedented consternation, and seemingly ever-growing ambiguity. In that wilderness journey that we explored a few weeks ago, it seems as though the questions, the unknowns, the frustrations and the expectations only grow from day to day. Some of us are experiencing the angst and worry of those who lived in fear of persecution, and others are a bit more like those with growing fret and frustration that what we think should happen hasn't yet – and many of us are little (or a lot) of both at the same time. The truth, however, is that we're all in that place of feeling that daily exacerbation of the underlying emotional, psychological and spiritual discord that has been stirring for months now. And to us, just as it was to those 2,000 years ago, this letter to the Hebrews comes as a profound reminder of those three fundamental truths...

1. Christ has opened to us a new life that we can live with the full assurance of faith.
2. Faith is trusting that one can weather a flood, risk a life, and part an impassable sea.
3. With that cloud of faithful witnesses surrounding us, and our eyes set on Christ before us, we can run the race and never grow weary and never lose heart.

But that, right there, is the key to hope. We have to realize that the letter to Hebrews, written into such angst-filled and tumultuous times, didn't change their circumstances. We need to note that Paul's writing to the Romans doesn't suggest that trusting and resting in faith will erase the trials. No, Hebrews reminds them that they can endure their trials with confidence, and Paul offers the perspective that the sufferings of today are nothing compared to glories of that which God will reveal to us in his time. The promise is for peace, grounded in hope, in the midst of trial – not in absence of it!

Hang onto that for a minute, and allow me a bit of a sidebar here. As many of you know, my preaching pattern is that the earliest days of the week are spent mentally reflecting upon Scripture, praying on things, and formulating that which is going to be the message of the week. Then, usually on Thursday, I sit down to actually put words to the page. This week was no different. By Wednesday afternoon I had a thematic statement, my Scriptural pattern and reflections were clarified, and my mind was ready to sit and write. Then Wednesday afternoon turned to evening, and everything went to pot. Because, as you all know, between those two times the Wisconsin Supreme Court overturned the standing Safer at Home Order, and municipalities around the state were all scrambling as to what to do next.

Now, I have no interest in tackling that legal question, nor even the myriad of opinions about if, when and how things should be opening across the state. I'm not going to tackle that in this (or probably any) message. But, what struck me so profoundly was the nearly unimaginable speed with which some people came bursting out of the gates in the wake of that ruling. Within a matter of a couple of hours social media was flooding with picture of open bars, filled with crowds of people, from all around the state. By Thursday morning, of course, municipalities were all finding ways to create structures of their own, but the sheer volume of those who flooded out on a moment's notice simply displayed how desperately we need hope.

Our human consciousness is pre-conditioned to strive for resolution. Why do you think every other question out there is about a vaccine? When things aren't the way we want them to be, we want that solved. It's that simple. We've talked about this before and we will talk about it again. When things are unsettling, uncomfortable, unclear or in any way disruptive to our desired pattern of existence, our entire mental consciousness hones in on the aspiration of resolution. We want this problem addressed, that issue remove, this barrier taken down...I could go on and on. But, the heart of all of this is that our human condition is one that clamors for a solution to every problem, and we will burst out of the gates the moment we think we see one.

But, that's where we come back around to these letters – our faith doesn't offer solution. Our faith offers wisdom. Our faith offers peace that passes all understanding. Our faith offers perspective and guidance. And our faith offers hope! Our faith doesn't offer solutions to our every problem – our faith offers the promise that we can run that race...we can enter that challenge...we can face that problem, whatever it may be, with the knowledge that Jesus has opened to us a new life, that a great cloud of witnesses has lived one miraculous story after another through this God in whom we trust, and that we can set our sights on the risen Christ knowing that by putting our trust in him we can have faith and hope in that which is unseen, and that we can know in the depths of our hearts that God will work towards the good in all things as we put our trust in him.

It doesn't matter where you stand on the political or ideological spectrum – and it doesn't make a lick of difference whether you rejoiced or cringed over the announcement of that Supreme Court ruling earlier this week – because we're all still in it. Today, tomorrow, for weeks and months to come this journey is far from over – and each and every one of us will find ourselves recurrently clamoring for a resolution to it all – for that moment in which it would all just go away. The bad news, my friends, is that our faith doesn't promise that. The good news, however, is that our faith offers the promise of rest as we await it. If we can just shift our sights – if we can just turn our gaze from our longing for resolution to the promise of the presence and care of the risen Christ who stands before us – we can find the hope of trusting in that which cannot be seen...we can find the rest of knowing that God is at work for the good in all things...and we can run this race with perseverance, wait upon God with patience, never growing weary and never losing heart.

For you, for me, for all in these turbulent days to come, may it be so!