

## Holding on to Faith

The letter to the Hebrews is one of the latest books written to make it into the New Testament. That's important for understanding it. In the letters written by the Apostle Paul earlier in the formation of the church, he is trying to convince them to stay strong in the faith, fervent in love, diligent in hope because the Christ is returning very soon. It was his deeply held belief that Jesus was coming back in his lifetime and the lifetime of the people to whom he was writing. But by the time that Hebrews is written, all of that first generation of Jesus' followers had died out. All of the people who had witnessed firsthand the resurrected Christ had gone to the grave themselves. And so the audience of this letter had begun to lose hope; their faith in the promise was starting to slip. I imagine they were saying things like, "was it really true that Jesus rose again? None of us saw it." "I thought he was coming back, but here we are waiting and there is no sign of it, and life is hard." Faith had become a difficult virtue to hold on to - no one present had touched Jesus, no one had heard his voice teaching a parable, no one had witnessed one of the miracles. That's why the author frames the discussion of faith as the "assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen." The people still hoped that the word Jesus had spoken was true - that it was the Father's good pleasure to give them a kingdom, but they had watched a generation pass without seeing that hope realized, and had begun to doubt.

So the writer of the letter does the most natural thing, the thing that we do every Sunday here. He reminded them of the transformative stories they held at the center of their faith - the ones on which their very lives and identities were built, in order to strengthen their resolve, their conviction, and put them squarely in the lineage of those great acts of faith. He starts with Abraham. Do you remember how he left everything behind to go to a foreign land because God told him it would be his inheritance and his children would be too numerous to count. He was well into his nineties, had barely escaped with his life on a couple of occasions, owned a plot of arid earth but certainly not a nation, and was clearly beyond his prime child-bearing years with a barren wife. I think it is fair to say that that promise was in serious doubt. But Abraham held the faith and God kept the promise. The writer here is subtly reminding the readers that, as Hebrews, they are all children of that promise and proof that faith in things hoped for, when God is the promiser will be realized in time. Today more than half the world, or right around four billion people, trace their faith heritage to Abraham. The promise was worth believing in, and so is the promise of the coming kingdom of God. That is the truth that the story is supposed to remind us of.

In his famous work, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Alexandre Solzenitsyn tells of a moment in which he had given up hope in a better future and needed to be reminded of the promise of God. Solzenitsyn was a political prisoner in Soviet Russia who was sentenced to work in the inhumane labor camps they called gulags. He was forced to do brutal manual labor for twelve hours a day while being fed only a starvation diet to purposely weaken him. He had

gotten so tired he had decided to give up. One day while working shoveling sand he simply laid down his tool, knowing that the guards would come and beat him, likely to death. But before the guard noticed and came over, one of the older prisoners who had to use a cane to walk but was still forced to work, hobbled up to him, and without saying a word, simply used his cane to draw a cross in the sand he had been shoveling, and then quickly erased it and moved on. He was reminding Solzenitsyn of the story of faith when hope was hard to hold on to. The cross was a telling of the story that said, “the promise was never about it being easy. We knew it was hard to follow Christ, to bear the cross, to face suffering and death. Struggle and darkness are inherent to the story. But the promise was that resurrection came afterward, that joy comes in the morning, that life triumphs.” And Alexandre picked up his shovel and started working again. And it is good that he did. He was eventually freed, and went on to tell the world about the atrocities there, to win a Nobel Prize in Literature for his work, and he lived to see the day that the Soviet Union fell and gulags with it.

I was reminded of Solzenitsyn recently when Jenny and I were travelling in Norway. We went to the hall where they award the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, and then walked over to the museum to see the display of all the laureates. Before our vacation began, I had gotten tired, emotionally exhausted really, from hearing the stories of terrorist attacks, of racial upheaval, religious fighting, attacks on minorities. The hope of the kingdom of God on earth just seemed like more than a distant promise; it seemed like a pipe dream. It seemed like the world was unraveling rather than moving toward a promised reign of the risen Christ in the kingdom of God on earth. It was good on vacation to be sort of out of the loop on current events for a few days.

But as I stood in what they call the hall of luminaries, I read of all the people honored there, chosen because, in the face of great adversity and much evidence to the contrary, they had chosen to believe that there was a better future worth striving for. I was reminded that it is simply not true that things are worse than they have ever been. Such thinking belies the accomplishments of those people represented there, and doesn't take seriously their stories. For instance, race relations are bad, but not worse than when black people were sold as slaves, or lynched in the south under Jim Crow, or even after schools were desegregated and the voting rights act was passed. To say otherwise undermines the sacrifices of MLK, and those who marched with him and were beaten for it in the streets on national television. Their story tells us that as those people who were there die off, it is time for a new generation to take of the cause and make the world a more just and peaceful place for all. When we despair, we need the story to be told again and to remember that nonviolent activism can actually draw the world a little closer to the kingdom of God.

The same is true for our stories of faith as we seek not to lose the hope of God's kingdom breaking into our world. When we are overcome with distrust for those unlike ourselves, and we let racial, ethnic, and religious divides cloud the way we see the world, we tell one another the story of the Good Samaritan and remember that it is from unexpected sources that healing comes. When we are overwhelmed by the number of starving children in our own back yards, we must remind one another of the story of the feeding of the five thousand, how it started with one little boy willing to share his food, and even though there were too many hungry stomachs to count, Jesus made sure the offering

was enough. That is the way the kingdom is built. When the numbers of the faithful in churches seems to dwindle we recall the story of Abraham and his faithfulness in following God, and the multitudes of descendants that were born from that faithfulness. And even when death strikes with its false threat of finality, we come to hear again, amongst the people of God, that story of the resurrection, and we are assured that there is an unseen kingdom in which we put our hope, and it is coming, and in that place there will be life.

In that face of a reality that seems contrary to everything we hope for in our faith, when Christ seems distant and maybe a little less than true, the telling and retelling of our core stories becomes all the more important. They allow us to do what our faith calls us to - to move forward with the conviction that things yet unseen are possible and attainable in our lifetime. We must hold fast to the hope that the kingdom of God is nearer all the time, and to work for that day. When that hope begins to take a little more faith than you seem to have, you should run your hands through the sands of the shore and count the grains, or walk out into the dark night and look up to the sky and try to number the stars, and then be reminded of the story - that you are a child of that covenant of Abraham, and you are an heir to that promised kingdom of God. Remember the story and your place in it, and then resolve to work with conviction so that others might see the kingdom of God among them and know the reality of things hoped for. Amen