

“Thoughts and Prayers”
August 11, 2019
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As I mentioned in the children’s sermon, this morning’s text deals with the concept of faith. And by faith, specifically, we are talking about faith in God, belief in God. The scripture contains an exhortation about keeping the faith, and yet there are a lot of uncertainties about the origin and audience of this text. Who were these people and why did they need a pep talk? Tradition has held that Paul wrote the letter to the Hebrews, but most scholars now reject that because the language and rhetorical style are so different from Paul’s other works. And while it is called a letter to the Hebrews, it reads more like a sermon. Without going into the nuances of the debate around this text, I think it is sufficient to say that this presents us with a significant challenge to fully understand and appreciate the historical context in which this message was delivered.

And yet, there is a timeless quality to it. What we do know for sure is that whoever wrote this was writing to a group that was struggling with belief in God, a message that is relevant in every age. Whether their particular struggle was related to persecution or just the garden variety day to day challenges of believing in something they could not see, this morning’s text seeks to encourage those who have some serious doubts about their faith and to remind them of the history of God’s promises that they might continue on the journey of faith with confidence. The lectionary has handpicked select verses, but as my study of this text unfolded over this past week, I felt we needed to hear all 16 verses to fully appreciate the scope of this message of faith.

Listen to God’s word to you in Hebrews 11:1-16:

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, **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.” ⁶And 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. ⁸**By faith** Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹**By faith** he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land,*



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living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” ¹³All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Perhaps in the reading of that scripture, you picked up on the refrain, “By faith.” It was used eight different times, and our writer used this refrain when summarizing some key moments in the story of Israel. By faith, these patriarchs (and a matriarch) of the faith believed in and trusted in God over the course of their lives.

Often when I engage the subject of faith, whether talking with family, friends, or parishioners, the definition of faith is over-simplified to a basic belief in God. On the surface, it presents itself as a general religious attitude or posture. Particularly among my atheist friends, it sounds like believing in impossible things like miracles just for the sake of righteousness. To an outsider (and sometimes to us insiders), it can sound like magic or hocus pocus. This version of understanding faith does not demand proof, because it is the wholesale believing in things that cannot be seen or proven for “the Bible tells me so.” Sometimes we call that blind faith, and we are told to just accept it. What’s worse, if things are going poorly in our lives, some people will say that we just don’t have enough of that blind faith. But that is for another sermon entirely.

We have inherited a few thousand years’ worth of scripture, theology, and our Protestant favorite of Creeds to make sure that we have just the right, exact belief. Countless people have fought and died over precise theology and interpretation, all in the name of owning and portraying the definitive picture of who God is. I, personally, have shaken and quivered in my high heels on floors of Presbytery and in front of committees attempting to articulate the perfect Reformed understanding to the question of faith so that I could earn the great honor of ordination.

It occurred to me in Seminary and it continues to haunt me now that these carefully crafted definitions of pretentious sounding ideas such as ecclesiology and eschatology are *maybe* the essential tenets of faith but most certainly of privilege. It is a luxury of the greatest kind to hang out in our ivory towers and ponder the mysteries of God. With our bellies full and shelter over our heads, we can debate the finer points of the interpretation of the Greek New Testament. With a comfortable pension plan, we can think the best thoughts and pray the best prayers. But this fancy, ornate definition of faith and the magnificent architecture we have built around it come crumbling to the ground in the face of crisis and tragedy.

These constructions cannot bear the weight of crushing doubt felt in the midst of chaos. And I confess that I, like so many, have some serious moments of doubt. I, like most pastors I know if they are being honest, have doubted God's very existence...including in recent history. It's a horrible feeling to wear the robe of a pastor and to stand in a pulpit when feeling like a fraud, when feeling like God might not be real after all. And the course of the last few years have tried my faith unlike any other time of my life.

It's no secret that our country is hurting and aching right now. It's been going on for some time, and I have alternated between anger, numbness, and tears. But this past week had me on my knees. It was the first week of school for many areas of our country. My own daughters are preparing for their senior year in high school, and like many parents at this stage of life, I don't want to miss a minute of it. As I prepare for my daughters' last first day of grade school, I've thought about the pictures I will take and the sweets that will be waiting for them when they come home. And as I've pondered this over last week, I was confronted with an image of a little girl, beautiful dark hair and gorgeous brown skin in an outfit that was probably selected and laid out the night before like so many other kids preparing for their first day of school. But in this picture, she had her hands covering her face, trying to shield us, the media, and the world from her tears and fears. You see, she came home from school and nobody was home. She didn't know where her parents were. She was one of many children who were abandoned this week, not by her parents, but by our country during an ICE raid in Mississippi. The Jackson Free Press described "a sobering scene, reporting that 'children finished their first day of school with no parents to go home to tonight. Babies and toddlers remained at daycare with no guardian to pick them up. A child vainly searched a workplace parking lot for missing parents. Children as young as toddlers were relying on neighbors and *even strangers* to pick them up outside their homes after school.'"¹

As I scrolled through this article, there were many other headlines of devastation competing for my attention. Yet more mass shootings on top of mass shootings left other children orphaned. Lois L. Oglesby was out for her first night on the town since her new baby was born. She was shot in the head at the attack in Dayton, OH, and her last action was to Facetime her children's father. She said, "Babe, I just got shot in the head. I need to get to my kids."² She never made it.

My faith is shaken. Although it's not my faith in God that is shaken as much as my faith in God's children. What does our faith in God look like in the face of such horror and heartbreak and tears? Well, from many Christians these days, it looks like "thoughts and prayers." With each tragedy, we have become masters of thoughts and prayers. We've been training for these moments for thousands of years, so that in the midst of crushing disappointment and devastation, instead of getting involved, we offer our thoughts and prayers. We have offered them so much that we've become a meme and the object of

¹ <https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/politics-culture/children-of-undocumented-immigrants-were-left-to-fend-for-themselves-in-mississippi/>

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/i-need-get-my-kids-mother-who-died-dayton-called-n1039581>

contempt for many in our society. One article I read calls it “semantic satiation” which is when a word or phrase is repeated so often, it loses its meaning and becomes gibberish.

McSweeney’s which is a website that typically publishes satire took a serious turn this week when it published this, “I have listened to your prayers, America, and I have come to the conclusion that they are cowardly, pointless, and shameful. Your prayers are not helping the victims or their families. Helping potential and actual gun violence victims is a bridge you could have crossed a long time ago, and you chose not to. You pray in order not to feel culpable in horrendous acts of violence. You pray in order to feel good.”³ Ouch, does that hurt. I share this excerpt not because I agree with it wholeheartedly. I actually do think thoughts and prayers mean something. But I think what this author wrote holds some painful truths about how our thoughts and prayers are landing out there. We would do well to take this feedback to heart. I think many in our society are saying that thoughts and prayers mean exactly nothing when not paired with faith in action.

I learned the lesson early on in my ministry that all the well-crafted theology and prayers in the world cannot comfort or heal in the middle night during a crisis. I was called to a labor and delivery room where tragedy was waiting for me. I cradled a perfect, beautiful, but lifeless baby in my arms in front of a broken young couple who just wanted their son baptized. They weren’t going to get to experience this child’s first birthday or his first day of kindergarten or his graduation or his wedding. But could they at least have him baptized? Our church’s polity dictates that baptisms have to be approved by session, and they have to happen during a church service surrounded by the community of faith. And I support the case for this theology when all is well. But in the middle of the night at the loss of an infant, faith demands that we push beyond our doctrine and our thoughts and our prayers and just show up. The church broke its own rules and baptized their son that night in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I share this as a cautionary tale about the ways we can trip up on our thoughts and prayers...sometimes faith doesn’t require certainty about precise theological doctrine. It just requires love and action and a whole lot of grace.

And that is the word I hear from Hebrews today. This writer recalls not only God’s promises to Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah, but he spells out the ways that they **participated** in the promise. None of them knew for certain there was a God. None of them knew if they were “doing it right.” But Abel offered a sacrifice, Noah built a giant boat, Abraham and Sarah set out for an imaginary land with no travel brochures, GPS, or defense system and lived in tents for the rest of their lives. To be sure, I’m guessing they had some thoughts and prayed some prayers along the way. But along with that, they took action, they got involved. It wasn’t enough for them to have right belief – for them, faith was about following that belief to its logical conclusion.

And I believe it is far past time for us to do the same. Children are being orphaned by gun violence and inhumane raids, and as followers of Jesus Christ and as people who take our

³ <https://www.mcsweeney.net/articles/god-has-heard-your-thoughts-and-prayers-and-he-thinks-they-are-fucking-bullshit>

faith seriously, we are called to protect and defend those babies! Because that, my friends, is the full expression of faith. Allow me to stand at the intersection between left and right, Democrats, Republicans, Independent voters and all others and say that I get that these issues are complicated and there aren't easy answers. But there are some pretty good hard answers out there, and those answers are worth breaking a sweat to find, to negotiate, to compromise. Let us not allow the difficulty and the complexity stand in the way of exercising our faith. Because these are not issues of politics, but these are issues of the Bible. These are issues of theology. These are issues of morality. These are issues of humanity.

Even in the face of those days when we are not even sure there is a God, faith intercedes and takes the moral high ground. Faith stands in the face of evil and says we will not tear families apart, and we will not tolerate another shooting.

Something else that happened this week. With joy and gratitude and maybe even a little pride, I share with you something that gives me hope: our denomination just ordained the first minister of gun violence prevention, the Rev. Deanna Hollas. It is the first ordained position of its kind across any denomination, and her goal is "to do more than react to the latest mass shooting with an offer of benedictions." She says, "While all that we do as Christians should be rooted in worship and prayer, it should not stay there. It is like breathing – worship and prayer is the in-breath, and action is the out-breath."⁴ May our faith in action reclaim the power of our thoughts and prayers as we get involved and participate fully in God's kingdom. Amen.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/28/us/minister-gun-violence-church.html>