
Let Us Hold Fast to the Confession of Our Hope

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
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About seven months ago, I broke down and did something I'd been avoiding, carefully, my whole Christian life: I began a study of the Letter to the Hebrews. Yes, I'd been avoiding it, because it's a difficult read. It's a difficult listen, too, isn't it? For one, it consists of a long, sustained, complicated argument, which requires patience and perseverance to get through, and resists convenient soundbites.

For another, it presents an ancient and foreign ritual world, with high priests and animal sacrifices and sprinkling of blood. Ick! Plus, there's all this talk of suffering, which I'm not a big fan of; and perfection, which rubs recovering perfectionists like me the wrong way.

But none of that compares to the damage done by interpreters who have used this letter to argue that Christianity has replaced Judaism—that God has rejected Jews in favor of Christians and rendered Israel's law and rituals null and void. It's an argument I have always rejected (and still do!) as arrogant, harmful, and completely inconsistent with the God I know.

Here's how I handled all of this: Whenever I came across something in the letter that I didn't like or understand, I closed my Bible and walked away. Which left me unprepared to counter harmful interpretations—let alone lead a Bible study on it.

So when members of our Eat Your Word Bible study wanted to tackle Hebrews, it was against my better judgment. But, trusting in their good companionship and wisdom, I ordered some commentaries, said a prayer, and we dug in. Together. On Zoom. That's right, this was about a year into the pandemic, when we were so tired of Zoom, and so weary in general, and so many of our losses were sinking in: the loss of life, of course. And the loss of trust, certainty, time and community, identity and purpose. Losses, or changes, to structures and routines and freedoms that we had believed were essential. I, for one, was feeling discouraged and really confused. Spiritually flat, or numb.

In a *New York Times* article published that same week, Adam Grant offered a name for this: "languishing," which he described as a "sense of stagnation and emptiness," and an ill-defined, unrecognized "void between depression and flourishing—the absence of well-being." It was, he said, "the neglected middle child of mental health." And the dominant emotion of 2021.

The Holy Spirit works in mysterious and mischievous ways, and here she had done it again. Because Hebrews turned out to be a perfect companion for this time!

We don't know much about the letter's original audience, but the text suggests they were dealing with some kind of low-grade crisis. Members of their congregation had been imprisoned, publicly shamed, abused; their possessions plundered. They had faced these hardships before, as new converts, with the newly kindled fire of Christ burning in their bellies; and they had endured, bravely!

But now that fire is burning less brightly. The spiritual highs have leveled off. They're *still* waiting for Christ's return and for the reward of their faithfulness. They've been running toward God, and justice and peace, so hard and for so long; and yet they *still* feel so far away. They are weary and discouraged. Some have given up completely on Christ, and on each another. Others have watched them go and worried: "Should I go too? Is this worth it—is it doing any good? Am I doing any good? Or did I just get this all wrong?" A spiritual malaise seems to have descended upon them. They are languishing.

Into this malaise, to this discouraged congregation, the pastor behind Hebrews exhorts, *Don't give up! Now is the time to you hold fast! Now is the time to draw nearer—even nearer—to God! Now is the time to encourage one another! Why? Because of Jesus Christ! And if you're no longer satisfied with your earlier understanding of Christ, then dig in deeper. Dig in deeper to the mystery of Jesus Christ.*

That's exactly what Hebrews does, and compels its readers and listeners to do: to dig in deeper—to hold fast—to *persevere*—through thirteen chapters of this *long*, complicated argument, about God's faithfulness as revealed in Jesus Christ, our merciful and faithful high priest.

OK, so that doesn't exactly clear things up. That's because it's a metaphor based on the wilderness tabernacle, whose rituals and architecture are unfamiliar to many of us. It had an outer courtyard, an outer sanctuary, and an inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, entered only by the high priest and only once a year. This architecture recognized the seriousness of sinful and imperfect humanity approaching this transcendent and mysterious God, *and* it recognized God's determination to be among the people anyway. Worship, ritual sacrifices, the priesthood, and sacred community were God-given means of facilitating this meeting of God and humanity, heaven and earth, and they are good. The tabernacle, Temple, and church are good! But they're not God. They are impermanent, imperfect, and unfinished. Just like the human beings who make them up.

So why bother? Why keep showing up—for worship, for prayer, for service, for God and one another? Why bother offering anything at all, then? These are questions that people of faith have asked time and again, especially when it gets hard. Questions we ask when we worry that we don't know how to pray anymore because it doesn't feel like it used to. When we fear that our faith isn't enough because it doesn't look like we think it should. When we fear that our offering—our sorrows, hopes, and longings--aren't worthy; our gifts for ministry not needed. They're the questions we ask when we mistake these periods of spiritual dryness, or languishing, for failure—rather than what they are: fallow seasons in which deeper roots may grow.

Hebrews answers all these questions and anxieties with a call to spiritual maturity and grit and generosity, grounded in Jesus Christ, who is our merciful and faithful high priest, and the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. A human being like us, Christ knows what it is to suffer and die, to love and to lose. And still, he obeyed God and persisted in love, to the very end. And in doing so, showed us how—and empowered us—to do the same.

Christ is the source of our hope, too. He shows us what lies ahead, too. He shows us why we bother, why we keep showing up and doing—*offering*--what we can. Because, get this!: he died and rose again and ascended into the heavenly Holiest of Holies, where he intercedes for us, and blesses and completes our offerings, however imperfect they may be. Because God wants and welcomes our offerings, and the world needs them, even when they fall short. Because even when we have no idea where we're going, as Thomas Merton prayed, our desire to please God does in fact please God. Your offering does in fact please God, and participates in—and is completed by--Christ's sacrifice for the world.

So let us approach God and one another with confidence, and offer whatever is ours to offer, knowing that God blesses it and returns it, as "the gifts of God, for the people of God," and for the world--for whoever needs that gift today. Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, *and* to good and loving interpretations of our scriptures. And when we come across parts of the Bible that scare or offend us, let us dig in. Together. And trust that God will meet us there, too.