

MESSAGE – Encouragement to Keep On  
October 10, 2021  
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Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:1-3

**1** In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. <sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. <sup>4</sup> So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

**2** We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. <sup>2</sup> For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, <sup>3</sup> how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?

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You've probably heard the expression "Preaching to the Choir".

To me it means that I'm bringing a message that the hearers already know, believe and live that message. That there's no real effort to have to land the message because the hearers already are convinced.

That's what I feel about today's message....but I also am convinced that there is a purpose for every sermon...that we are all on a continual journey of faith...that none of us are completed yet.

That said, I ponder:

Why would anyone walk away from or ignore a faith whose central claim is that God loves you?

See what I mean – today's message is preaching to the choir – because you're already here; haven't walked from the faith.

But a lot of people do; a lot of people have left the faith or at least don't participate in church for a lot of reasons. Some recent surveys give us these reasons:

- People haven't found a church they like
- Don't like the sermons
- Don't feel welcome
- Practice faith in other ways
- Church is irrelevant; leaders hypocritical
- Doubt is prohibited
- God is missing
- Not learning about God
- Not finding community

Whatever the reason, this is not new in the Christian faith.

The letter that we call Hebrews in the New Testament was written to a people who were struggling in their faith....and were contemplating walking away from it...or actually abandoning the faith altogether.

Hebrews was written specifically to address this matter.

In those days, people were turning away from the faith for fear of severe persecution. And they truly were persecuted; they experienced arrest, imprisonment, torture, or ridicule.

As a result, they were tempted to abandon Christianity

Like the Israelites in the wilderness.....tempted to "turn back"

These Christians were tempted to "turn back" to their Jewish religious practice for a few reasons:

Judaism was an accepted religion in the Roman empire

If you were Jewish in the marketplace, you could still make a living....

Conversely, you might actually go hungry as a Christian

My guess is you probably have opinions about a lot of these reasons and while it might be self-soothing to pick these reasons and the people who hold them apart, it would be better for us to do something a little more worthwhile: figure out how to minister to them by recognizing our own temptations to sideline faith.

The writer of Hebrews was encouraging people to hold on – because the message of Jesus was so valuable.

His sacrifice was more valuable than the sacrifices in the temple

His wisdom was greater than that of angels

His teaching was higher than that of Moses

As it states right at the beginning of the letter: God speaks clearly and completely through Jesus.

Jesus is the source of the fullness of life

The writer of Hebrews was concerned that people who moved away from the faith and the faith practices, they were ignoring "such a great salvation"; they would be closing themselves off from the experience of God.

You know, I haven't walked away from the faith, but there have been times when I've missed the experience of God.

- When I stop the practice of confession

*I had entered into a time of self-adulation (I'm so great at this)*

*I had such confidence in my own knowledge that I was not turning to God for wisdom and guidance.*

*I was so full of myself/pride, that there was no room for God.*

I was still involved in church, sure, but in another sense, I had walked away from the heart of the faith.

Another time was spiritual laziness. Just letting myself get out of important habits, particularly of reading and meditating on Scripture.

And the result: I was going to church and coming away empty because I no longer experienced God – but that was because I wasn't opening myself up to God.

In our Wesleyan tradition, we are taught the "means of grace".

These are the things that we do to open ourselves up to experience God.

Worship, prayer, Scripture reading, communion, even Christian conversation

Doing these things are the things we do to "show up"...but we need to recognize that there is a difference between going through the motions and actually engaging your heart in the practice.

Let me explain it this way: say you go fishing. You have a rod and reel, bait and you make your way to the lake. At the end of the day you have caught no fish. The reason is not because the fish weren't there. The reason is: though you've been given all the

tools, you didn't put your line and hook in the water. You didn't commit yourself to the act of fishing.

And you miss out.

Missing out on Jesus and the experience of his salvation

It is what was happening with those early Christians....

It is what is happening with people today....

It might even be happening with any one of us sitting here.

So I'd like to make the invitation to be like Anna.

Luke 2:36-38

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. <sup>38</sup> Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

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I've always been impressed by Anna. She was a woman who continued in the day in and day out practice of faith. She entered intentionally into that life in a specific way for probably over 60 years.....

And then the day came when Joseph and Mary brought the infant Jesus to the temple for dedication. I believe that Anna recognized Jesus for who he was because had such a deep spiritual life.

And I've wondered about Anna: What if she hadn't shown up that day? What if she said, "I've done this long enough. I'm done." Or what if she showed up physically but hadn't shown up spiritually? What if she simply went thru the motions without her spirit engaging?

Would she have experienced the Christ child?

Both Anna and the writer of Hebrews are giving us a message of encouragement.

To keep on; to stay the course.

To engage the faith; not walk away or drift.

That's what Anna did.  
And that's what the writer of Hebrews did.  
Because then we experience God.

I know that those times when my heart has returned to the full practice of my faith, I've never been disappointed:

- The experience of God is profound; my heart is assured; I am convinced of salvation.
- And I know I'm loved.

So let us be like Anna and the Hebrews author, encouraging others to hold onto the faith, not because we judge them, but because we understand them; because we're the "choir" who needs encouragement in our own faith at times.

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Let's affirm our faith together.  
Let's make it more than a recitation....let's open our hearts.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.**