

“The Real Power”

We are not alone. This is the first word of good news we take hold of this morning. We are not alone but sometimes it feels like we are. What I'm talking about has nothing to do with whether or not there are people around. In fact, we can be in a crowd and still feel cut off. This sense of being alone is less about what's going on outside of us and more about what's going on inside. Many of our children and grandchildren began school this past week. Every year at this time, my mind drifts back to when I was of school age. The start of a new school year was a mixed bag for me. Do you remember what it was like for you? I felt the excitement of moving into a new grade level, wondering what my new teacher would be like, guessing whether certain subjects would be easier than others, and I had a readiness to get the year going. But at the same time, the unknown of what was coming made me anxious. This was especially true the summer my family moved to a new community. It was the year I started highschool. I hardly knew anyone. The school building was immense and there were over 2000 students at that school, not counting the teachers and staff. Despite all of the commotion and crowds of my first days in 9th grade, I felt like I was alone. I thought, “Nobody knows me. Everybody else but me has this highschool thing figured out. No one will talk to me,” I convinced myself, “and if they do I won't know what to say.” It was a real challenge and we've all had experiences like this. The feeling of being isolated and alone usually hits when we're threatened or in the midst of a significant struggle. The voice inside our heads says, “I'm the only one going through this. Nobody understands. I've got to figure this out on my own because there isn't anywhere else to turn.” Everytime we feel this way, everytime we're cut off and feeling like nobody cares or understands, our God wants us to know we are not alone. This is one of the key results of faith's power in our lives. Faith is the assurance that we are connected to a divine presence that not only understands us but deeply loves us. And, here's the thing, it is always true. There is no challenge, no struggle, no threat we face that can cut us off from God.

If we are not sure this morning about what faith can do our reading from the Book of Hebrews wants to convince us. The section we've heard today reads like the Hall of Fame for the faithful. We're reminded of Moses and Joshua, along with Gideon, Samson, David and Samuel. In each case, God made possible what otherwise seemed impossible. As the reading goes along, we're tempted to slap a PG-13 rating on this passage. It is real and it is graphic. We're told of terrible persecutions experienced by the early Christians, involving torture and violence. Lions and fire and stoning and prison and death, these were the attempts by the world's power agents to smother the spirit of faith in the lives of the early Christians. In every case, says the bible, those who suffered held on and they remained with God. Now, we may react to all of this saying, “Well, those folks were exceptional.” What the writer gives us are examples of the bible's most famous personalities. “We aren't like them,” we say. Even the people who are unnamed in the passage exude an extraordinary amount of faith in the face of incredible threats. Our struggles seem like nothing when compared to theirs. We aren't like them. This is where the bible's message pushes back. They are like us. Even across the great expanse of time, like them we struggle with what causes us to question what we believe.

Think about the violence that is so prevalent in our world, including the recent shootings of the past couple of weeks and the police standoff in a Philadelphia neighborhood just days ago. These tragedies may not threaten us personally but they weigh on us. They leave us wondering, “What is becoming of our world? Can our lawmakers or any of us change things?” What threatens us in our modern world is not exactly the same as the threats experienced by the early church but the results are similar. Hopelessness and despair take hold. This is where faith makes a difference. It made a difference long ago and it makes a difference in us today. I love the image the writer of Hebrews gives us. He describes life like a race. We are running this race and we are surrounded by what he describes as a “great cloud of witnesses.” Those who have gone before in the faith are cheering for us. They give us courage. A couple of weeks back the Brown family gathered for our yearly summer reunion. Our family has experienced some significant loss in the past year with the death of several extended family members. As the hamburgers and hotdogs were pulled off the grill, we gathered in a circle, held hands and prayed. We acknowledged our loss but also affirmed that the presence of those we've loved were with us. These weren't just words. They surrounded us and we sensed their love. It's this kind of spiritual strength that the bible points to this morning. Even when we have every reason to give up, the power of faith will not let us go. Let me restate the first word of good news for us this morning. We are not alone.

The second word of good news this morning, even greater than the first, is what happens when we look to Jesus, who is so beautifully described in our passage as the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” It sounds odd to say it but sometimes we forget the cross. They are everywhere, the crosses. In this room the cross hangs on the wall. It's

positioned on the table. Some of us wear it around our necks. How can we forget the cross? It's not that we forget the object of it. We forget the power of it. At times, the early Christians wondered if their faith was strong enough. They knew they were supposed to trust God but they also knew the words come easy. It's building one's life on trust in God that is hard. Look to the cross, says the writer. All our struggles, all of our failures, all our desires, all our longings, all of it, Jesus carried through his death and resurrection. A simple correction of perspective is all that is needed. Look to the cross. Faith doesn't depend upon how much we work at it. Faith is God's work in us. This is a good news word worth remembering. Faith is God's work in us. The cross will not let us forget what God has done. Walking the path of faith begins with our eyes focused on Jesus.

We are not alone and faith is God's work in us. This is the bible's message for us today. We are not alone and faith is God's work in us. OK, what's next? Last evening Kelly and I attended a surprise birthday party. I've decided I like being part of the group who surprises as opposed to being the surprised one, but no matter where we are in the process it's fun. Keeping the secret of a surprise isn't the main thing. What matters is when the surprise is revealed and the celebration begins. The power of faith is like that. We come to worship and study our bibles and say our prayers - and all of this solidifies the secret we are holding, that we are not alone and God is working in us. All of this prepares us for the next time we struggle, or the next time we feel our confidence fading, or the next time we wonder if we have what it takes. The secret we hold about our life with God bursts forth and we celebrate a strength and certainty that becomes a witness to others about the difference a life with Jesus makes.

This is what is next for us, letting what God is doing in us to come out. Let's come back to the cross as we wrap up the preaching today. When Jesus hung there he spoke the words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." (Ps 22:1) But then we're told, he looked to heaven and gave up his spirit. Giving our lives to God isn't a one time experience. We give ourselves up to God all of the time and this is key to letting what God is doing in us to come out and to make a difference in our world. Here's what I suggest this week, especially when the moment is tough or you're especially anxious. Say, "God, I give you my life." Work gets rough: "God, I give you my life." You receive bad news in the world of about someone you love: "God, I give you my life." You are stuck and you can't see your next step: "God, I give you my life." Giving our lives to God, it sounds like it's something we are doing but it is really opening ourselves to what God is doing and when that happens we'll know we're not alone.

We are not alone and faith is God working in us. We can trust this. We do trust this. Amen and Amen.