

Keep the Faith

II Timothy 4:6-8; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 18:1-8

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Thirty-Sixth Anniversary at Austin Heights

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Thirty-six years ago today, Jane and I joined Austin Heights. Today's sermon is both a reflection on looking back on all those years and a reflection on looking forward to what is next.

Faith is the key. So, keep the faith.

When I was growing up, I occasionally heard someone say, "Keep the faith." It was a word of encouragement – keep the faith. It meant don't give up – keep the faith. Don't give in – keep the faith. It meant "stay true to what you've been taught, what you've been given" by your forefathers and foremothers in the Christian faith. Stay true, keep your eyes on the prize – keep the faith.

To keep the faith has less to do with dotting the I's and crossing the T's of correct doctrine and has much to do with how we walk in life. It has to do with keeping on keeping on. Faith is about trust. Trusting God more than we trust anyone or anything else. The Living God is trustworthy, worthy of our faith, so we keep the faith.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. It's not living on certitude. It is not about getting the facts ahead of time and then walking. It is about going on in the face of immense difficulty based upon the

assurance we have in Christ. Faith, belief, trust, assurance – that’s what we’re talking about.

The Hebrews writer knows that we can’t keep the faith in the face of difficulty and be able to stand against the Powers of Death by having an abstract discussion about faith. Indeed, throughout the entire Bible there is little or no interest in having abstract discussions about such things as faith. What the Bible does, what Jesus does, what the writer of Hebrews does is give us examples of our ancestors in the Old Testament who lived by faith, who kept the faith. Every example of faith the author celebrates is less about right belief than right action, the combination of belief and behavior, the embodiment of trust in God over time.

The premier biblical exemplar of keeping the faith is Abraham and Sarah. The writer says, “*he set out not knowing where he was going*” (11:8). They lived in tents so they could move easily, improvising along the way, keeping their eyes on the prize of what God wants.

I’ve long been partial to this chapter in Hebrews, what’s been called “the roll call of the faithful” to be encouraged, to help us persevere, to help us keep the faith. The writer walks us down the hall with the portraits of our ancestors hanging on the walls. Old Abraham and Sarah, but then so many more. There is Moses, and the Exodus generation who faced Pharaoh, and then endured forty years in the wilderness. Realizing this storytelling could take all day, the writer summarizes: “*And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets...*” (Heb 11:32). He points down the hall at all of the pictures on the wall.

When I was a boy in the First Baptist Church of Stamford, Texas down one of the halls was a photo gallery of all the pastors. I used to go down there and stare at those pictures, wondering who they were and what they were like. Some I had heard stories about while most I knew nothing about. Some stayed a long time while others were there a short time before going somewhere else. But they were all there reminding the congregation of our ancestors and our stories of who we are partly because of who they were.

The roll call of the faithful in Hebrews is telling us who we are because of who they were. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Rahab, ... Every one of them swam against the current of their time. Every one of them marched to a different drummer – God’s drumbeat. Every one of them lived against the odds. Every one of them kept going even when the way was not always clear. And each one made a difference for the kingdom of God.

Enoch walked with God against the odds. Noah built an ark when the sun was still shining. Sarah and Abraham came home and gave birth to God’s people in their old age. And Moses, Moses. *Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land. And tell ole Pharaoh, let my people go.*

All of that by the power of faith. The Hebrews writer starts picking up the pace and getting excited: These ancestors *through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness,*” and the writer keeps going, *“They were tortured and killed. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented--of whom the world was not worthy.”* (Hebrews 11:32-38)

And yet by the power of this faith, they kept on in spite of the odds, against the odds, swimming upstream, and then in a burst of glory in the 12th chapter, the writer says:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer, the perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken up at the right hand of the throne of God.” (12:1-2)

The author of Hebrews is trying to encourage a small, struggling community of Christians. And he does so by reminding them that they are part of an extraordinary legacy of people who lived by faith. Faith is faithfulness. Faith is keeping faith across time. Faith is consistency, “a long obedience in the same direction.” Faith is showing up, even when you don’t feel like it. Faith is the courage to keep going when the going is hard, because the journey is long, the work is tedious, and you will meet resistance.

So, keep the faith! And here is the underlying truth of the gospel: we are able to keep the faith because the source of faith is the Living God we know in Jesus. We keep the faith because the faith keeps us. We are able to keep the faith because we are first in something bigger than ourselves and deeper and greater than our own strength. We are in Christ. We are because Jesus Christ is.

You’ve heard the old saying dating back to 17th century New England, “Well-behaved women seldom make history” (quoted in Thomas G. Long,

Proclaiming the Parables, p. 352). Here are two stories about women who make history.

Our first story is from Luke, where Jesus tells us the parable of the widow and the judge, about our need to pray always and not lose heart. A widow with no status, no power, and no influence, only her persistence keeps her coming to an unjust, uncaring judge until she outlasts him. Finally, he relents and gives her the justice she seeks because he knows she will wear him out. And Jesus says, we are to cry to our loving and just God day and night. We are to pray and not lose heart and we are able to not lose heart because we have a God who listens.

Faith is not losing heart.

Our second story is told by Loyal Jones, longtime folklorist and teacher at Berea College, Kentucky who died in 2023. He tells the story of Mrs. Ollie Combs who lived in Honey Gap, way up in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. Her husband, Balis, was a coal miner, and together they had 5 sons, one of whom was permanently paralyzed from a car wreck and confined to a bed there at home. One son was still in school, another son had died, while the other three – triplets- were unemployed. By mid-1965 when all this happened, Mr. Combs had just died, and Mrs. Combs and her four sons were living on Social Security and a small disability allowance, in the small 3 room cabin on the side of a mountain. To quote Mrs. Combs, “We lived hard.”

A long time before, a coal mining company had bought the mineral rights to the land on which the Combs lived. The mining company had what was called a “broad form deed,” which meant the mining company had the right to do whatever they wanted to the surface of the land in order to get to the coal underneath. On

Nov. 22, 1965, bulldozers from the coal company pushed through the trees onto the Combs land to strip mine the land, a simple process of bulldozing anything and everything off the surface to get to the coal seam, so the massive power shovels can dig up the coal at whatever depth it is found. The trees, rocks, and earth, what's called the "overburden" then plummet down the side of the mountain, crushing, destroying, and polluting whatever might be in the path. It was only a matter of a few days before the Combs house would be uninhabitable if not destroyed.

So, small and frail 61-year-old Mrs. Combs climbed the steep mountain above her house and sat down in the path of the bulldozers, even though there was already a court injunction against picketing or interfering with mining operations. Mrs. Combs told the bulldozer operators and then the company men, "This land and this house is all we've got. Go on and leave us alone."

The president of the coal company tried to reason with her, "The law's on our side. We have a restraining order to keep you folks off the strip sites."

"It's not worth the paper it's written on," Mrs. Combs responded.

"I've never been stopped yet," the president warned.

"Neither have I," she said.

Soon the "High" Sheriff, Bud Hylton, a deputy, and two state patrolmen came and arrested Mrs. Combs. She refused to get up from the dozer path, forcing them to carry her down the mountain, before taking her to the county courthouse where she was released on bond.

The next day she heard the bulldozers up the mountain, so she again trudged up the mountain, and again she sat down in front of the dozers, and again she was arrested, carried down the mountain, taken to the courthouse and released on bond. The next day the same thing happened, and for a third time she was arrested, carried down the mountain, and this time put in jail.

To make a long story short, and to use contemporary language, Mrs. Combs and her story went viral. People in town and up in the hollers and mountains came down and got involved supporting Mrs. Combs. The story was picked up by wire services and television and spread all over the country. Eventually, the governor and the state legislature got involved and a bill was introduced called “The Widow Combs Bill” that began to regulate strip mining and change the broad form deed (*The Failure and the Hope: Essays of Southern Churchmen*, ed. Will D. Campbell and James Y. Holloway, “Mrs. Combs and the Bulldozers” by Loyal Jones, pp. 185-194).

Mrs. Combs knew what it meant to not give up and to keep on keeping on. She made history. She did not lose heart.

Keeping the faith is ordinary people coming together to accomplish extraordinary things to keep God’s vision alive and to do the work of grace, mercy, love, and justice in this hard, old world.

Trusting God with the outcome. Faith is an endurance run; it’s a marathon. Pace yourself. Stay hydrated. Stick with your buddies. But keep going. As Martin Luther King said, “If you can’t fly, then run; if you can’t run, then walk; if you can’t walk, then crawl; but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.”

Keep the faith.

But remember this about running this endurance race. It's not a competition. It's not about winners and losers. Living the life of faith in Christ is counter to everything we know in the wider world about competition, survival of the fittest and all that. Capitalism may be based upon competition and Social Darwinism (survival of the fittest) but following Christ is not. It's about cooperation. The whole point of the Hebrews writer's efforts is to encourage that small community of believers to hang in there – together. To endure – together. To persevere – together. To trust God and not lose heart – together.

The image that comes to my mind is that it is like running a race in the Special Olympics and one of the runners falls. Instead of going on and finishing the race, the other runners stop, and go back and help the fallen runner to get up and hobble along until they all cross the finish line together.

Folks, that's church! That's keeping the faith! Together!

So, we keep the faith because our faith is anchored in Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of faith. Theologian Tom Long say that the community of faith is “a great unbroken cord of faith that stretches all the way from the beginning of human history all the way to the heavenly sanctuary in the City of God, where the cord has been securely fastened and anchored by Jesus.” He continues, “The links are formed by faithful people, hand in hand, generation after generation, holding fast to each other and to Christ.”

So, in a few minutes when we hold each other's hands for the benediction, we're not simply holding the hands of each other in this small sanctuary. We're holding hands with all those who have gone before us in keeping the faith. We're holding hands with Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Noah, Rahab, Paul, Timothy, Francis

of Assisi, Roger Williams, Rembrandt, Johann Sebastian Bach, Martin Luther King, and Fannie Lou Hammer. But also holding hands with us are little known, humble, and overlooked heroes of faith who hung in there and did not give up, like Mrs. Combs. And there is Jack and Florence Decker, Archie McDonald, Bob Carroll, Angela Key, and others of Austin Heights, and Larry and Betty Wade of Zion Hill, and Charlotte Stokes and her father Arthur Weaver and on and on. All who encouraged us and taught us and showed us the way are holding hands with us every Sunday morning.

And they're holding hands with us so we can keep the faith in the face of the Powers of Darkness, Domination, and Despair. I heard C.T. Vivian pray a long time ago, "O God, the battle is hard, and the journey is long, so be with us."

So, we don't give up. We keep the faith.

Keep the faith when you feel like it and keep it when you don't.

Keep the faith. Keep the faith when you think you know what you're doing and keep the faith when you don't.

Keep the faith when you're scared and keep the faith when you're courageous.

Keep the faith when you can't see the way and keep the faith when the way is clear and well-lighted.

Keep the faith when you're alone and feeling cut-off and keep the faith when you're in the middle of friends.

Keep the faith on Monday and Tuesday and keep the faith on Sunday mornings.

Keep the faith on the mountain top of exaltation and keep the faith in the valley of humiliation.

Keep the faith. You're not alone. There is a whole cloud of witnesses shouting encouragement from the grandstands: Don't give up! Keep going! Come on! Keep the faith!

Keep the faith. We're not alone. Jesus Christ has run the race before us, endured the cross, despised the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, so we will not grow weary or fainthearted!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.