

Season after Pentecost
Hebrews: Week 1 & 2
August 15 & 16, 2015
Haven Lutheran Church
Readings: Hebrews 1: 1-4; 2: 10-18
“Rekindling the Passion”

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

This is what I think many people inside and outside of church want to say to a pastor: “What does a book written by a bunch of Middle Eastern men hundreds or thousands of years ago have to do with me? They write in language hard to understand, referring to things and situations we can’t know about, in a time when they would never have even dreamed of what science and technology has brought into our lives. Can it really have anything to say about life today?” The question of the usefulness or relevance of the Biblical writings might get yet another boost when you look at the denseness of the book we call Hebrews. To such a challenge I would ask that you listen to some comments written about the book of Hebrews by Rev. Dr. Frances Taylor Gench:

“Hebrews addresses believers who have grown weary in the Christian way and who are in danger of abandoning their Christian vocation . . . It is apparent from [clues in the text] that Hebrews is addressed to people who have been Christians for some time but who find that their earlier enthusiasm has faded and that their faith commitment has waned. They have grown “sluggish” and in danger of “drifting” and “falling away.” Many have stopped attending the Christian assembly altogether. Moreover, they have ceased to grow in their understanding of the Christian faith.”¹

How’s that for relevant and contemporary-sounding? As our churches genuinely worry about the steady decline of participation in Christian communities . . . While we wonder why more than 50% of the American population has never been part of any church, the author of Hebrews, writing long ago, speaks to similar circumstances and concerns. God’s Word in Holy Scripture STILL speaks truth into our times as different as it is from the ancient world.

The author of Hebrews turns our worries and fretting of Christianity's decline in a different direction than we might assume . . . or wish. This author doesn't point to the culture and attitudes outside the Christian community but instead points within the Christian church. Listen to that quote again, applying it to our church:

“Hebrews addresses believers who have grown weary in the Christian way and who are in danger of abandoning their Christian vocation . . . It is apparent from [clues in the text] that Hebrews is addressed to people who have been Christians for some time but who find that their earlier enthusiasm has faded and that their faith commitment has waned. They have grown “sluggish” and in danger of “drifting” and “falling away.” Many have stopped attending the Christian assembly altogether. Moreover, they have ceased to grow in their understanding of the Christian faith.”²

God's Word today is seriously challenging, my brothers and sisters. Most of us have been Christians for some time. Many of us since childhood. How might you describe your enthusiasm or commitment to love and follow Jesus? Might you describe your faith as active or “sluggish” and “drifting”? Do you think your understanding of the Christian faith and the way to live it has grown over the last few years? Has your understanding of the Christian faith evolved into something different from what it was when you were confirmed or the last time you participated in intentional faith-building or Bible Study?

I know these are NOT easy questions to face or answer honestly. I know because I wonder if my own enthusiasm is sluggish. I worry that I've fallen into “going through the motions”: worship? “Check”; offering? “Check;” write Lutheran on forms that ask about religious preferences? “Check.” Read the newsletter? “check”. If that is the sum total of my faith, than any wonder those outside the church aren't looking into the church? Who wants to be a part of a group that lacks passion, hope and enthusiasm? Yes, our culture is not particularly supportive of the church communities that once thrived. But what part do *our own* faith and our own church community have to do with that lack of interest or hostility? I'm walking in dangerous waters here. You could get mad at me. You could tune

me out. You could go find another pastor who will just let you feel good about being a member of a church and “Tsk, tsk” with you about those “other folks” who don’t belong to a church. That would be safer.

Maybe it’s turning 60. Maybe it’s having fifteen years in ministry, most of them right here at Haven. Hebrews has me questioning that line between being comfortable and too comfortable, between surviving and living, between my role as chaplain and my role to proclaim the gospel so it’s heard in all it’s challenging vibrancies. But most of all, Hebrews has me wondering if my relationship with God has fallen into mindlessness that borders on neglect. You know, like a couple who have been together a while who can come to take each other for granted? Forget to say the “thank you’s,” to look in the other’s eyes when they say, “I love you,” to be excited about time together, to be happily anxious to tell that person about something that happened. Relationships in the messiness of real life can’t usually sustain the same kind of excitement as there is in the beginning. But in love, that passion doesn’t die. It evolves into many other expressions – courtesies, taking care of chores and maybe children, sharing feelings and working through problems. Hebrews has me wondering if I’ve come to take God for granted. It has nudged me to ask you to wonder about that, too. Is my relationship with God, is your relationship with God like a couple who have drifted apart without even noticing that it was happening? If so, is that good enough or do we do something about it? How do you and I renew that spark in our love of God and in how we live out our faith? To reignite that passion and spark in each of us and in Haven is my most fervent desire for us. Are you with me?

The author of Hebrews thinks we need more than a pep talk. He seems convinced that we sluggish, drifting believers need to deepen our understanding of the person and work of Jesus — “the one through whom God has spoken a sure and incomparable word, and through whom are available rich resources for the life of faith.”³ In simpler words, he prescribes we rediscover the Lord who loves us unconditionally and forever and we

rediscover our love of that God. Sometimes a couple consulting with a marriage counselor might be asked to take a breath and write down those traits and qualities they still value in the other. The author of Hebrews suggests we might wish to do the same as we turn again to renew our relationship with the Lord. So he begins: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” (1:1-2a) “The God whom we confess to be our God is no isolated and remote deity but one who speaks, who is present to be experienced and known, who has continually reached out to the creation.” This is what the author of Hebrews would put first on his list of “What I love about you, God.” What would be on your list? To reignite the passion and spark of our faith in each of us and in Haven is my most fervent desire for us. There’s not a quick fix but a pathway we must seek, one step at a time. Make your list of what you love about God. Give it as a gift of hope and reconciliation to our Lord. Bring an unsigned copy of your list and put it in the offering plate next week. We’ll post them on a board and marvel at the goodness of our Lord.

Now is the time to rekindle the relationship with our Lord

that fuels the faith

which makes it possible for each of us and this community

to be the light that draws others to our awesome God. Are you with me?

Pastor Linda M Alessandri 8/15/15

ENDNOTE

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1. Frances Taylor Gench, Hebrews and James Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 pp 3-4
 2. Frances Taylor Gench, Hebrews and James Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 pp 3-4
 3. Gench p.5