

Sermon Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16
Faith and Faithfulness in Uncertain Times
9th Sunday after Pentecost
August 10th, 2025

Hear words from the modern day prophet Jewel:

“If I could tell the world just one thing it would be that we’re all okay. And not to worry ‘cause worry is wasteful and useless in times like these. I won’t be made useless. I won’t be idle in despair. I will gather myself around my faith, for light does the darkness most fear.’* I don’t know about you, but I find these words quite powerful.

Now I have to say that I’m disagreeing with the line that ‘we’re all okay’. As a society, as the larger community, we’re not okay. Civility and compassion seem out the window, and blatant cruelty and disdain have taken their place. We may live in a bubble, where the fallout from hard-nosed and merciless policies hasn’t reached us yet, but we are not okay. Sooner or later, we all will have to pay the piper. In fact, we already literally have started to do so by paying more for most imported goods, like coffee...

If I could tell the world just one thing, it would be that we’re not okay. But I don’t want to knock Jewel – who grew up Mormon, by the way. After all, she wrote the lyrics for her song ‘Hands’ when she in her teens, broke, and living out of her car – but despite the hardships had a hopeful outlook on life, bordering on idealism. I am broke – but I can still use my hands - I’m okay. I can relate to that – as I said in an earlier sermon, I am a recovering idealist.

But those lyrics touched me in a special way when I recently heard that song again – it had been a while, this song came out in 1998, more than a quarter century ago. Don’t worry, “ ‘cause worry is wasteful and useless in times like these.” That goes hand in hand with the famous passage from Matthew 6 which we hear again and again during Thanksgiving services, where Jesus says, don’t worry about your life, what you will eat and what you will wear. Worry won’t get you anywhere. And then in Jewel’s song we hear the defiant, ‘I won’t be made useless. I won’t be idle in despair. I will gather myself around my faith – for light does the darkness most fear’ – which sounds a little bit Yoda-esque, as she wants to say that darkness fears the light most; but the lyrics have to rhyme, after all.

I think Jewel is capturing something important: as persons of faith, as those who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and believe that he is the light of the world,

which overcomes darkness, evil, sin, and death, we need to have a defiant attitude. Despite all the things going on in this country and this world today that are not okay, we mustn't be made useless or be idle in despair – as much as people in power try to incapacitate us. We mustn't be convinced by those voices who tell us that faith is a merely personal thing, that it's between me and my personal Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and that it is mostly about the confession of the lips rather than a lived confession of our hearts and hands. That we can pray one thing, and then go out and do the total opposite, and that that's okay. That's not how faith works.

Faith is not just some abstract or philosophical concept; faith leads to a faithful response to what we believe. Faith leads to action. And so Jewel sings about her hands, which might be small, but which still can make a difference. We are: God's eyes, God's hands, God's heart, called to help transform the world we live in into the kingdom of heaven by our kindness.

And this is not simply the theology of an idealistic young singer / songwriter. The author of Hebrews, whoever they were, is trying to make the exact same point. In the lesson we just heard, it's all about faith. And we are given a great definition of what faith is: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." So faith focuses on something that isn't yet, but that we hope will come to pass eventually. And for us as Christians, our hope is in the establishment of God's will and God's kingdom of peace, justice, and enough for all on earth, as it is in heaven. The author of Hebrews alludes to that at the end of the lesson we heard today: we are in essence "strangers and foreigners on the earth", still "seeking for the homeland", which is a "heavenly homeland". We are merely migrants on our way to the kingdom of God, actively living into God's promise and in accordance with our faith in things that have not come to pass – yet.

And an excellent example for that is the story of Abraham and Sarah, which Hebrews uses, and which we find in the book of Genesis. And it's quite a story. So Abraham is 75 years old when he receives the call from God to leave his clan, his comfortable home, his lands, and his status as a wealthy member of the community in Haran – which is in modern day Turkey – and go 'to the land that I (God) will show you'. A land that, so God, eventually will belong to Abraham's descendants. There's just one problem: there are no descendants yet. Abraham's wife, Sarah, herself at an advanced age, hasn't been able to bear a child. Just put yourself into Abraham's position for a moment, and answer honestly: would you do it? Leave everything behind and go on this journey into the unknown at the age of 75, living on hope and those promises that sound too good to ever become true?

But Abraham goes, crisscrossing Canaan – the Promised Land – as a nomad, making deals and negotiating with the tribes that actually own the land, as a petitioner seeking favors. Abraham is doing this for years – and still, there is no heir in sight. And whenever Abraham gets impatient with God (which happens a few times), God just repeats the initial promise: one day, Abraham, all this will be – not yours, but it will belong to your descendants, of which there are currently none, but they will be like the stars in the sky. So Abraham trudges on, and I don't want to know what Sarah has to say about this whole affair. But, trusting God's promises, Abraham stubbornly and defiantly moves on, not only having faith and twiddling his thumbs, but actively living into the promise, going where God leads him, building relationships, alliances, and goodwill along the way.

So Abraham and Sarah do this for 25 years before Sarah finally gives birth to a son, Isaac. And you can do the math: Abraham is 100 at that point. Sarah is 90. The promise is at least starting to be fulfilled. Abraham's faith and faithfulness are starting to pay off. Although he will not live to see the promises fulfilled. And, by the way, neither will the next 20 generations or. The only piece of land Abraham will ever own is a burial plot for Sarah, which a local chieftain sells to him.

The author of Hebrews is lifting up Abraham's and Sarah's example as he is giving a pep talk to the congregation he is writing to. He tries his best to encourage the young and apparently faltering congregation he writes to. Who knows what this young Christian community is dealing with? It could be discrimination and persecution. Maybe there is disappointment: Christ promised to come again and to be with us always in the realm he promised to us, the kingdom of heaven. Where is he? Where is this wonderful kingdom? Why is it taking so long? Are we there yet? Where is God in all our trials and tribulations? Where is God at work in our lives? Where and how do we see God's promises fulfilled?

And the author of Hebrew's is trying to remind them: God's promises were fulfilled throughout history, even though it might have taken awhile, and there was no instant gratification. Hang in there. God has promised – and God will fulfill. Have faith. And be stubbornly and defiantly faithful in an environment where you encounter anything but glimpses of the promised kingdom of God. Use your hands, your eyes, your hearts, to actively live into this realm.

And so here we are, roughly 2,000 years later. Maybe we are tired of waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled, tired of trying to share God's light, love, and compassion in an environment that is increasingly hostile, and trying to instill fear

in all of us. Maybe we are feeling quite comfortable where and how we are, not pining for a heavenly homeland, having surrendered to the idea that what we experience here on earth is just the way it is, and we should make the best of it, with no vision or aspiration for that which could be. Maybe we are feeling helpless and useless – what could we do against a system that has all the power? Maybe we feel worried, or are even despairing. Maybe we are not only wavering in our faithfulness, but our faith as well, as we become cynical rather than clinging to our hope.

However, my defiant hope and prayer is that we won't give in, and won't give up. As Jewel sings, "I won't be made useless, I won't be idle in despair. I will gather myself around my faith, for light does the darkness most fear. My hands are small, I know, but they're not yours, they are my own, and I am never broken. In the end, only kindness matters. We are: God's eyes, God's hands, God's heart", in a world that is increasingly getting heartless; we are called to remain faithful, no matter, what. Amen

**'Hands' by Jewel Kilcher and Patrick Leonard, Atlantic Records 1998*