

# “Holding Fast to Hope”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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## Mark 13:1-8

*As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’*

*When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.*

## Hebrews 10:19-25

*Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your holy spirit. I pray that you would take our worries and our joys, all the things that might distract us, and settle them. I pray that you would take the words that we have heard from scripture, the words we offer in song and in prayer, and the words that you laid upon my heart to share this morning. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word have its way within us. And let that word be the way in which we live our lives. In what we say, and in what we do, may your way be our way. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So in a little bit, we have the privilege of baptizing Carter into the life of the church. He's a little guy, about two feet long, cute as all get out, and you're going to see him pretty soon. But he's going to get baptized, and except for maybe a picture or two or the video archive of this, I'm pretty sure he will not remember getting wet today in church. And what happens - very rarely, but it happens - is every now and then, someone comes to Karen or I and asks, "Can I get baptized again?" Now we were taught in seminary to be horrified by such a question. "Can you get bapti--" "No! You only get baptized once! For there is one God, one faith, one baptism, and that is our reformed tradition." But to be honest, pastorally, I wish - and I think Karen does at times - we wish that we could baptize people again. Because often people that were baptized as infants come back into the life of the church or they've just been a really difficult period in their life, and they want to mark a new beginning. And especially a new beginning with God. And so they want to come, and they want to be baptized all over again. And we have to figure out a tactful way of telling them, "Sorry. You can't do that." Even though, like I say, for them, it would be very meaningful. Because in their minds what is happening is that they are saying, "I'm sorry for all the things that I have done. I'm sorry for the hurt that I have caused, and I want to make a new start with God, with my family, with my friends, with my co-workers, and with myself."

The baptism, in a way, is a line. And everything on one side of it is what's old, and everything that's on the other side is what's new. And they want to walk across that line with confidence, be baptized, and then carry that blessing forward.

And like I said, in our tradition, we don't do that. And the reason we don't do that is found in this passage. The reason we don't do that is in the work of Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven. Period. The end. As much as we do our prayer of confession every week, we think that we are confessing our sins and being forgiven all over again each week. It's sort of like doing the laundry, right? You wear the shirt, the pants, they get a little bit dirty, you've got to throw them in the washer, do your prayer of confession, and then they come out nice and clean. Except the faith doesn't work that way because believe it or not, you're clean, period. It's done. Now, it doesn't feel that way for many of us, but in reality, what we trust is that the single work of Christ upon the cross has paid whatever price needs to be paid in order for all of us to have every stupid thing we've ever said or done, all the guilt, the worry, the fretting, all of the hurt, all of it just taken away. Now, how to talk about this in a way that doesn't belittle this fact is kind of difficult because this is a profound theological truth. Even before we confess, we're forgiven, and part of our confessing every week is for us as people is to remember that we are forgiven and then to hear it again that we're always forgiven. We're always forgiven again and again and again, but I've got a couple of examples I want to offer to you as ways to think about this, and again, these are not quite up to the standards of what this principle deserves.

Every now and then, believe it or not, I do the dishes. Rarely at home. I see you out there, don't worry. My wife's out there, "No, he doesn't do the--" here at church I do the dishes. Up in the staff kitchen, there's a dishwasher. I'll go in and put a coffee cup or 10 in there that I've collected out of my office, and I'll notice that it's kind of full and so I'll get a little pod from under the sink, I'll throw it in the dishwasher, I'll shut the door, I'll push it shut, hit the start button, and the coolest part of the whole thing is I get to take the little, tiny, magnetic board, a sign that says dirty, I pull that off of the dishwasher, I get to slide the handle up and down, and I get to write clean on it. And then I put it back on because I know when it's done, they'll be clean, and someone can take the coffee cups out. In a sense, if you think about that board and the handle moving up and down, every time you think about something you've done where you wish you hadn't done it, when you write it on there, it doesn't need someone to swipe the handle up and down because it doesn't ever stick. It's like the magnetic particles inside that board are broken. They don't work. So whatever hurt you've caused or whatever thing you regret, and especially thinking about Thanksgiving coming and all the families that are going to be gathering around the table, if you've had issues with any of the people that will be at that Thanksgiving table, all of those things have been resolved in Christ, and again, that's something that we have to, as it says here, hang onto. Hold fast to that confession of our hope. We've got to hang on to that and trust that it's true.

Now, another friend, who I met through a congregant who talks about the little committee that lives inside of her head. is always sort of talking down to her, criticizing her, telling her all the mistakes she's made, and they're just constant. There's constant chatter. In a sense, what this passage is saying to us is that that committee has lost its ability to speak. And the cool thing is, I think a lot of us know that somewhere, maybe in our souls or a deep spot within us. But the voices in our head are always trying to pick on us. I read recently that our brain is built to pick out differences, to notice failures or faults first before it notices connections. The article is called *Kinships*. And what it's trying to get us to realize is that all of the brokenness in our life that is caused by our sin, all of that has been repaired in Christ. And now it's up to us to carry that trust and live it out into the world. And so the passage tells us that we can approach this truth with a true heart that is full of faith. And when it says heart in the passage, what it means is all of who we are. Our life, our soul, our mind and our spirit, all of our trust that Christ's work is final and complete. And that if we trust that, maybe it can start to well up within us and we can live it out into the world. Or at it says here, we can hold first to this confession of our hope without wavering for he who has promised is faithful. The final part of the passage says, "Let us consider now how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some but encouraging one another especially as we see the day approaching." Well, we've been the day approaching from millennia and the chance for us to be discouraged is quite high. But what this part really is inviting us to do is to realize that our job here is to trust that God forgives us, to embrace that, and to provoke one another in living that out. And like I said, some of the examples I have don't quite live up to this high and lofty theological standard, so here I go again.

Last week, I spent some time in the desert of northwest New Mexico. I was there on retreat in order to get certified to become a spiritual director. When I was in the athnaga camp years ago, a friend took me to a spa nearby called Ojo Caliente. A mineral spa that has different pools of water. One of them-- the only one I can remember is an arsenic pool that's supposed to help with arthritis, but there are several different pools. I went and got my swimsuit on and went into a couple of the pools. But what I was really looking forward to is my very first mud bath. Now, I thought when you got a mudbath you waddled into this big tub of mud up to your neck and kind of wallowed around in it and that was it. No. You go into a room, the attendant comes in with you and invites you to lie down on this massage of bed. There's all these towels

everywhere. And when you get in there, just pull the sheet up to your face. Okay, so I did that. They knocked, said, "Are you ready?" I said, "Yes." They come in and apparently I did see it, like a bucket of mud and they start slathering you from head to toe in mud. And then they invite you to roll over and they do the other side, and then they have you roll over again, and they get it where some of it fell off and they wrap you in the towels, and then they wrap you in a thermal blanket. And then I think they turn up the temperature by 500 degrees because they leave the room and you start to bake. But as you bake, you start to dry. And I could feel the crinkly parts like, "Okay, my fingers are kind of crinkly and my face felt kind of funny." And then they come back in and they rub some kind of weird desert bush brush thing over you and unpackage you, and then they send you to the tub where you get to wash all the stuff off and you come out. And the first thing I noticed is like, "Wow, my skin feels amazing. Just awesome." Well, last week, I didn't have time to go to Ojo Caliente, so instead, I just went out to the desert with a bucket. I got some dirt, I poured some water into the bucket and the dirt. I mixed it-- made some mud and I stood in the shower and I slathered myself from head to toe. Like I said, I don't do dishes at home and I'm not good at cleaning. I stood there until I dried, all crinkly again. And then I jumped into the shower, washed it all off, got dressed and went to my meeting with the other people. I kid you not, I sat down at that meeting and the person sitting next to me looked at me and said, "Oh, my gosh. Your skin is radiant [laughter]."

That's baptism. All the dirt, all the mud, all the dryness and crunchiness of life, all of it gets washed away. And what remains is God's radiant presence. So as we move into carter's baptism, I want to invite all of you to contemplate how you might allow the love of God and the good deeds that God allows you to do to radiate out of you and out of your being and affect the lives of all those that you're going to be with in the week ahead. We all know it when we've met someone like that. When we've met someone who radiates love and peace and gentleness. It changes the temperature in the room and we can touch it,,, we can see it, we just know it. SO, my prayer is that all of us can let that love and that goodness come out from who we are in order to make the world a better place. Amen.