

8.17.2025 Pentecost 10

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

“By faith – Look to Jesus”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. a*

The Christian faith is a “living faith,” and today’s readings drive home this theme. Jeremiah describes a living God, writing, “*Am I a God nearby...and not a God far off?*” The triune God in whose name we baptize is a living God, always nearby, always creating a new thing in us and in the church. Every day, the Holy Spirit is giving birth to renewed life in the church. Every day, God is recreating you with the grace and hope of faith.

Yet all of us can struggle with this kind of dynamic and growing faith. Who among us hasn’t hesitated to do something new? Paul’s words describe this: “*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!*” (2 Cor. 5:17). To be in Christ, is to know the new creation God is creating in you and in the church.

The eminent church historian Jaroslav Pelikan once addressed this with words that have become well known: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, and traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” In saying, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead,” Pelikan meant that the Christian tradition is a living faith handed to us by previous generations who lived and died in witness to their faith in Jesus. We have received a living faith from them, hearing God’s word, celebrating the sacraments, and living in service to others. To be a Christian is to stand upon the shoulders of the saints, men and women, who trusted in the same word of God that we also put our trust in.

Yet who hasn’t also encountered the second half of Pelikan’s observation, “Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” Pelikan observed how we can struggle with change and the new thing Christ is seeking to do in our lives and in the church. We say things like, “Well, we’ve always done it this way,” and “We’ve never done that before – and we aren’t going to either.” We can close our hearts and minds to new directions and work God seeks to do among us. A living faith, centered upon the living word of God, Jesus Christ, open us to be a new creation.

Jesus suggests that in following him we will “*know how to interpret the present time in which we live.*” The time Jesus speaks of is not the *chronos* of measured time, as we mark on a calendar or clock; Jesus speaks of the *kairos* of God’s time, those *kairos* “moments” when God’s time breaks into our lives with a new creation, new directions, and new understandings.

Today’s reading from Hebrews speaks of “*being surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,*” pointing to the biblical and historical witnesses of the faith who are always inspiring us. These are the shoulders we stand upon as people of faith: by faith Israel passed through the Red Sea and by faith the walls of Jericho fell. We are surrounded by the faith of Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets, and all who suffered for their faith. This is the living faith of the dead, continuing to speak to us in God’s word today.

Our stained-glass windows depict the communion of saints, the great cloud of witnesses looking to Christ. At the bottom of the windows, we are depicted as those still on our race of faith also looking to Jesus. Who are the people, the cloud of witnesses, whose faith surrounds you? Who shared the good news of Jesus with you? Who taught you to pray and put your trust in God? Who taught you to love and welcome others as Christ has loved and welcomed you? Give thanks for them and the great cloud of witnesses surrounding you, always urging you on with a living faith!

I am also surrounded by the heroes of the faith, both men and women, the saints of the church, friends and family, who have witnessed to me making me who I am. Mari and I were recently talking about two members of our Japanese family who are part of this cloud of witnesses: Mari's maternal grandfather and great-grandfather, who both suffered imprisonment for their faith in Jesus Christ during World War 2. During the war Mari's grandfather, whose first name was Kansuke, was sentenced to hard labor in Manchuria for his faith, dying there. His photo is forever frozen in time as a young father and husband, who never got to see his children grow, yet whose faith and witness shaped his family, helping them continue to look to Jesus.

Jesus gets at the difficulty of families and faith, saying, *"From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided father against son...mother against daughter..."* Jesus is the great divide in human history. To follow him is to place him first in your life above family, friends, and nation. Yet we have domesticated Jesus, often placing others above him. We have called ourselves his followers without practicing discipleship to him. What Pelikan meant in his observation that "traditionalism is the dead faith of the living," is that Christians have at times placed the human traditions of family and nation above Jesus.

We cannot run the race that has been set before us, looking to Jesus, if we place others above him. To look to Jesus sets the direction of our lives. To look to Jesus reorders all of life's priorities. Like the saints of old, we look to Jesus so that we might interpret and discern the present times in which we live. Look to Jesus, remain steadfast to the living faith given to you, and pass the faith to others.

Hebrews refers to faith as *"the race that is set before us."* How is your race of faith going? Are you holding on to the faith handed to you? Are you passing your faith to others along the way? To be a Christian is to press on toward the finish of life with faith. Where are you on your race of faith?

If you have ever raced or if you exercise, you will know that you can't run with weights for very long. Hebrews writes, *"Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race set before us."* There is a film titled, *The Mission*, in which Robert De Niro plays a former mercenary and slave trader named Rodrigo Mendoza, who after killing his brother, experiences repentance and faith. In a powerful scene, Mendoza climbs a cliff next to a waterfall, carrying the full weight of his armor and swords in a large net upon his back, symbolizing the weight of the sins he has committed. At the top of the waterfall, he discards this

weight in the river, which washes his past away. This is the point of Hebrews: looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, we let go of the past, the weight of our sins and burdens and run the race of faith with perseverance.

How is your race of faith going? Are you laying aside every weight and sin, looking to Jesus and carrying the cross he has given to you so that you might live for others?

Today's psalm, Psalm 82, speaks about our faith as an active witness to the justice of God's living word, the ethical core of the Bible,

*Give justice to the weak and the orphan;  
maintain the rights of the lowly and the destitute.  
Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*

Look to Jesus and you will see him in your neighbor in need. Look to Jesus and you will be surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses urging you on in your race of faith. Look to him, and he will help you lift and carry your neighbor in need.

The faith of previous generations is completed in you. Hebrews reminds us: "*though they were commended for their faith...they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.*" Look to Jesus, persevere in faith, handing your faith on to others. Your faith completes the faith of the saints.

How is your race of faith going? What weights have you left behind, and what burdens, fears, and sins do you struggle to let go of?

God is not finished with you. God is always recreating you to run, to witness, and to serve others. Look to Jesus. He runs alongside of you. With him, you will know the times in which you live. Look to him; run the race of faith; serve and love others. Amen.