

“You Gotta Have Faith”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

On September 18, 1787, the last day of the constitutional convention, a lady from Philadelphia, Mrs. Powel, asked Dr. Benjamin Franklin,

“Well, Doctor, what have we got? A republic or a monarchy?”

“A republic,” replied Doctor Franklin, “if you can keep it.”

Many in our country are fearing that our time has run out.

Further, that core values of integrity, equality, and charity have been cast aside for authoritarianism, isolationism, and provincialism.

And those who believe this, feel helpless to do anything to stem the tide, since it seems everything is working against them.

Only time will tell if this is the way things are going to be. But this should only double our resolve to bring the love of God to the world in all that we say and to have faith this is not a futile effort.

Today’s scripture passages provoke us, reassure us, and galvanize us in that regard.

From Isaiah we heard: “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!”
Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!”

You may recall that in Genesis God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness.

While many in our culture define the sin of Sodom as sexual, the story of Sodom in Genesis 19 highlights the violence of the people and their utter disregard for the visitors to their town as their wickedness.

For Isaiah the sin in question seems to be the economic oppression of the poor [Isaiah 3:15]. Isaiah’s comparison of Judah’s leaders to the people of Sodom, then, seems to be a precursor to the tradition called out later in Ezekiel 16:49, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”

“You Gotta Have Faith”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

Like the other eighth century BCE prophets, Isaiah condemns the theater of worship without the presence of true care for the weakest in society.

Worship is not something we do to appease an ill-tempered, vengeful God.

Rather than being transactional, worship is to be transformative. It should influence who we are, what we do, and how we do it.

Thus, after calling out the untransformative worship of the people, Isaiah lays out in verses 16-17 what should be the outgrowth of worship: ceasing to do evil, learning to do good, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow.

God is inviting the people to be transformed—to work with God on the process of becoming new. It is not a free pass, no pixie dust or abracadabra—the people will have to be willing and obedient. But neither is this a scene of unmitigated fire and sulfur from heaven.

The overarching thing that Isaiah sees in all this is a God who, true to God’s own self-description as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [Exodus 34:6], far prefers and desires to save the people from their sins rather than destroy them because of such behavior.

God remains committed to God’s people, even in the face of repeated rejection by them.

Bottom line: 1) Worship with integrity (verses 11-15) and 2) Practice justice (verses 16-17).

Today’s gospel lesson from Luke 12 complements that point.

The structure of Luke's story is that God's kingdom or reign in the world was established with Jesus' resurrection so that we live now in the context of a world where God's reign or government has been established but is not yet fully in power.

“You Gotta Have Faith”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

Jesus is pulling the future coming of the kingdom into the present. He’s looking at the end to convey what is important now: prioritization, preparation, and vocation.

Analogous to Isaiah, Jesus says our priority is to “Sell your possessions, and give alms.”

“Almsgiving” involves more than charity in a condescending or transactional way, in which the wealthy half give their excess to the poorer half. Almsgiving is an expression of true solidarity with others. Almsgiving isn’t about offerings that help those with less money; it must be about sharing power and advantage. Such transformative solidarity creates “unfailing treasure in heaven.” As he says in verse 34, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Building up treasure is not by possessing but by giving. By building up our neighbor, we become rich to God. That is our priority.

Then comes our preparation. The watchfulness Jesus commands, though, is not an anxious anticipation of the end of the world but rather an eager expectation of God's consummation of history.

What Jesus is commending is faith – faith that frees one to be generous; faith that enables one to leave anxiety behind; faith that creates in one confidence about a future secured not by human endeavor or achievement but by God alone.

Thus, this text is about vocation, not justification. These texts do not point to a simple quid pro quo of “be prepared and you will be saved.”

We are not just sitting around waiting for God to give us the kingdom.

We are called to be people who engage in “active waiting” for Christ’s return. But as this passage makes clear, Jesus’ coming is not an invitation into otherworldly retreat but into this-worldly readiness.

“You Gotta Have Faith”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

Instead, the idea here is to be ready so that when God calls you to action—which is now, not at the Second Coming—you seize the opportunity and spread the good news.

Being alert and being ready are like potential energy, ready to be turned into kinetic energy when prompted. The energy produced here is gospel-centered: healing, justice, love, grace, peace.

So, we go out to do all of this in faith. But what does that mean? As today’s epistle passage starts in Hebrews 11 with that famous verse, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

A beautiful, poetic phrase. But what does it mean? It’s hard to translate the Greek with the intended meaning.

Madison Pierce, Associate Professor of New Testament at Western Theological Seminary suggest the translation: “Now faith is the foundation for things being hoped for, proof for things we do not see.”

Faith is the reason we hope for things, trusting that God will fulfill his promises, and faith provides proof (in a manner of speaking) that unseen things exist. This explanation or definition of faith is operative throughout the rest of the chapter. The author says this first in order that every time a reader encounters “by faith,” they will have this definition in view.

The Rev. Dr. Christopher T. Holmes, scholar at First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, has more colloquial and interpretative translation:

“Faith rests in or taps into the really real of hoped-for things; it leads to conviction and action in the visible world, even though it is rooted in things that cannot be seen.”

“You Gotta Have Faith”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

Thus, today’s passage in the letter to the Hebrews is a summons to faith and a word of encouragement (Hebrews 13:22) to a community who appears to have grown weary of the Christian life.

Here in chapter 11, the text shifts away from emphasizing what God has promised to focus on the human experience of faith in that promise. It moves from emphasizing the power of God to underscoring the vital and empowering nature of human faith.

Those who faithfully respond to God’s call and who seek the city that God prepares make themselves alien to the world around them.

So, faith, rather than being something ultimately dependent upon us, comes to us at God’s own initiative which, mediated by God’s Word, engenders a hope-filled response to the promises of God.

This response of trust in God makes “visible” -- through the lives of the assembly of believers -- what otherwise would remain “invisible.” In other words, one who trusts God’s promises is God’s own witness to the new creation that is breaking into our “everyday” visible world through the gospel of Christ Jesus.

In short, God’s invisible work of new creation becomes visible (incarnate) in the life of the one who trusts God.

Both aspects of “faith” are well illustrated by Abraham’s complex relationship to God (verses 8-12; 17-19). “Endurance,” then, is also an attribute of faith lived in the real world.

In fact, from Hebrews’ perspective, the world of faith is the “real world.”

The “real world,” then, is a world made visible by those who are drawn into the very heart of God by the divine work of faith in them. And what is the foundation of that faith? It is one’s belief that God is

“You Gotta Have Faith”

Sermon – August 10, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

the source of life and mercy and loving kindness, despite what we hear on the media.

Thus, faith provides a guarantee, the peg on which we hang our hopes. But just as Abraham left his homeland and roamed a bit at God’s command, the second dimension of faith is that it moves us forward.

Abraham and Sara did receive their son Isaac in old age as God said they would, but Abraham never reached the Promise Land nor saw his multitude of descendants that God promised him. Still, he moved forward as God commanded because he had faith in God even to the unseen that would come long after he died.

So, we need both dimensions of faithfulness. We need to hold fast to the promises of God and to move forward into the future which is God's.

With all the craziness in the world today and the challenges you have in your life, it is easy to get bogged down in the mire and muck.

But you are followers of Christ. And you have a community of Christ-followers with you. So, you can do it!

To paraphrase George Michael from a song in a different context,

“You gotta have faith.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.