

Bum-pum. Bum-pum. Bum-pum. Do you hear it in this morning's lessons? It's the sound of faith.

By faith, our ancestors received ...
By faith we understand ...
By faith Abraham obeyed ...
By faith he stayed ...
By faith he received ...
Bum-pum. Bum-pum. Bum-pum.

These are the words that pulse through the Letter to the Hebrews this morning. If we re-insert the verses that were taken out of this portion, we'd hear more: "by faith ... by faith ... by faith..."

Scholars aren't sure who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews, but we are sure that it was written to a people who are growing weary, who are leaving the community of faith. It was written to people who have made sacrifices for their faith, who have endured a great deal of suffering, but now they are giving up. They're tired and frustrated and can't see the point of continuing to lean in.

For them, living together as a faithful community was hard enough in the short-term, but even harder to stick with for the long haul. I get it: it's hard to see the long game, beyond whatever circumstances and hardships are right smack in front of us. This early Christian community is tired, and they seem to feel that maybe their time and energy might be better spent elsewhere.

Many a-preacher have waved around a floppy Bible and admonished their flock that 'faith is a muscle that must be exercised!' As cliché as that sentiment is, it's true. This analogy of practice and commitment of showing up day after day, wherever it is that God is asking us to be, even if that means before the first snooze alarm or after an exhausting day at work, it matters that we exercise our faith muscle. Even if our efforts seem insignificant or fruitless, it matters that we keep trying; even if our routine feels stagnant, our prayers feel floppy or ill coordinated, or if our attention span seems lackadaisical, it matters that we keep it up.

Our faith journey is not so much an accomplishment, one more task to check off on God's honey-do list ~ it's something we do to be open to God, to accept direction and accountability, to be empowered for God's work in the world. Our faith journey isn't really about us, or even about the Church, it's about *God's* faithfulness ... to us and to all creation. And we **get to** join in on the building of (the re-creating of) God's kingdom on earth as it already is in heaven. We get to do the work of faith because God has been consistently faithful to us. Whether the spiritual training we undertake for the health of our faith comes easily to us, or if we sometimes recognize that we're doing it with gritted teeth, we are blessed that Jesus uses this desire of ours to carry us into a future that is as yet unseen.

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The audience that the epistle writer is addressing is rather unlike our St. Peter's community, but it serves as a good reminder to keep putting one faithful foot in front of the other. During the more rigorous COVID protocol time, we maintained our outreach ministries, educational opportunities, worship offerings ... despite having to pivot and modify and livestream and drive-through and mask and socially distance and ... Our core rhythm didn't falter. Bum-pum. Bum-pum. Bum-pum. We came through that really hard time and our pulse remained strong.

Since last fall, our community of faith here at St. Peter's has enjoyed a full cycle of "the new normal," even as we've continued to try to figure out what that is and what that means. We're still finding our new footing, but there is energy and vitality in this new, rich landscape we find ourselves. There are new faces, new ministries, new opportunities ... along with many of the familiar programs and events that have continued to be life-giving to us and to literally thousands of others outside these walls. Our heartbeat is strong. Bum-pum. Bum-pum. Bum-pum.

"By faith ... by faith ... by faith ..." writes this author. These words are encouragement to stick together, stick with Jesus, trust that by living with willing hearts, hearts open to the future God has prepared like our forebearers in faith did, we too will become inheritors of that future, a future better than anything we can ask for or imagine. This is true as we move forward in our own personal lives as well as the people of St. Peter's.

The program and office staff met off-site for two days this past week to look ahead and plan for this next program year. Y'all, without getting overly gooshy, this team is amazing! Through prayer, a lot of conversation, and armed with pencils,

calendars and sticky-notes, (and to borrow our Gospel writer’s imagery), we ‘lit our lamps and got dressed for action.’ This staff is ready and excited to assist God in equipping the faithful people of this community (all of y’all) to do the same.

If we continue with that ‘faith is a muscle’ metaphor, then church is the scrimmage field where we get to learn new techniques, new strategies; where we practice what Jesus preaches, so that when we leave this arena, we have the skills to live our faith ‘out there.’ But by living into the rhythms of this community, by remaining focused on our common mission, our heartbeats can synch with the heartbeat of God and respond to the needs of the world. Bum-pum. Bum-pum. ‘Thy kingdom come.’ ‘Thy will be done.’ Bum-pum. ‘On earth ... as it is in heaven.’ Bum-pum. Bum-pum.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It takes practice. It is strengthened by the time and effort and commitment we put into it, and it fortifies us, strengthens us and helps us find our way when tougher times inevitably hit. Bum-pum. Bum-pum. Bum-pum. By faith ... by faith ... by faith...

When we pan out and look at the bigger picture, it’s Jesus’ faith *in us* that makes the difference. The wonders Jesus can work through our sometimes seemingly mustard-seed sized faith are greater than we can possibly comprehend with our limited vision or understanding. Maybe you’re feeling a bit weary like the people our epistle lesson was written for. Or maybe you’re as jazzed up as I feel. Either way, Jesus sees a future that we cannot; we get to take our next faithful steps by looking toward it, preparing for it, and doing our part to make it happen.

Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal bishop of the 19th century and well-known for his preaching, said, “I beg you to live far-looking lives. Lift up your eyes and see the places afar off. You may not see all the way between, but keep your eyes forward still. The present cannot be known or done except by the future’s interpretation and inspiration. And no one can know the future rightly except as they know it in Him who is the Lord of all our lives, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.”¹

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¹ The More Abundant Life