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Restoring Our Faith

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First Episcopal District Bible Study

The Year of *RESTORATION*

Key Verse:

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

[Ephesians 6:16]

Study Passage:

Hebrews 10:19 - 11:1

THE RECKONING

In his latest book, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (2017), Ta-Nehisi Coates narrates his journey to a worldview he calls, “black atheism.” “I would like to believe in God,” he begins, “I simply can’t. The reasons are physical. When I was nine, some kid beat me up for amusement, and when I came home crying to my father, his answer—*Fight that boy or fight me*—was godless, because it told me that there was no justice in the world, save the justice we dish out with our own hands. When I was twelve, six boys jumped off the number 28 bus...threw me to the ground, and stomped on my head. But what struck me most that afternoon was not those boys but the godless, heathen adults walking by. Down there on the ground,

my head literally being kicked in, I understood: No one, not my father, not the cops, and certainly not anyone’s God, was coming to save me” (109).

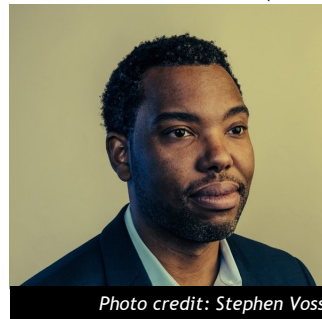


Photo credit: Stephen Voss

Coates employs his personal story as an apt metaphor for the lessons of history. “Nothing,” he contends, “in the record of human history argues for divine morality,

and a great deal argues against it. What we know is that good people often suffer terribly, while perpetrators of horrific evil backstroke through all the pleasures of the world” (110). “My ancestors,” Coates continues, “the great mass of them, had not lived in times of hope. Most of them were not the Harriet Tubmans or Martin Luther Kings, living on the precipice of monumental change, but were strugglers wending their



THE RECKONING *(continued)*

way through the murky before, after, and in-between. They did not alter history...[they] had failed to cajole and coerce the masters of America. Their ambition of a better world had been frustrated” (111).

For Coates, ideas like “cosmic justice [and] collective hope” have no meaning in the face of the persistence of evil that he carefully chronicles as a journalist: a prison industrial complex that preys upon black and brown bodies for profit; an economic system whose gains go to the rich while workers’ wages stagnate and their right to unionize is rolled back; the continued killing of unarmed black people by police with little to no accountability. We rightly decry the mass shootings occurring in our schools, but ignore that most mass murders are domestic violence assaults. The U.S. Congress can find money to make war, but can’t find the money to fix the water supply in Flint, MI. Instead of a warm welcome, asylum seekers receive indefinite detention while their children are ripped from their arms and

kept in cages. Meanwhile, immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia are separated from their children through deportations that rarely make it on the evening news, but which tear at the fabric of our communities.

For these reasons and many more, Coates concludes, “The warlords of history are still kicking our heads in, and no one, not our fathers, not our Gods, is coming to save us” (110). As followers of Jesus, we may be quick to reject Coates’ atheism with our lips; but, we must still contend with the toll that despair can take on our souls. It can lead to an apathetic faith that sees no hope for God’s restoration of the world. Or, we may assume an accommodated faith that has made itself comfortable with the way things are and only seeks our own salvation and prosperity. Our faith may not be dead, but how healthy is it?



RECLAMATION

Though evil persists, it is not all-powerful. God promises that the choice to live by faith will be rewarded with the ability to resist the flaming arrows of despair and doubt, of apathy and accommodation.



RECOVERY

The Letter to the Hebrews is unique among the New Testament epistles in that it does not contain any identifying information that would alert us as to the author, audience, or the specific circumstances that gave rise to its composition. Although Hebrews was assigned to the collection of Pauline Epistles at the church councils of the 4th century, earlier church leaders of the 1st and 2nd centuries did not ascribe authorship to the Apostle Paul. Clement attributed the book to Luke; Tertullian claimed it could have been Barnabas; and Origen was content to remark that “only God knows” who wrote the book.

What we do know is that the writer of Hebrews calls the book a “word of exhortation” (13:22) to people who were facing considerable hardship. In the face of despair and doubt, Hebrews reminds its readers that in Christ “we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (6:19). Using the language of ancient Hebrew liturgical practice, Hebrews imagines Jesus as the great high priest who not only intercedes to God on our behalf, but makes a way for us to access the Most Holy place for ourselves. In our study passage, the writer instructs the readers on how to utilize this access to sustain the life of faith.



Hebrews 10:19 - 11:1

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching...

³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering.

³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by

side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. ³⁷ For,

“In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.”
[Is. 26:20; Hab. 2:3]

³⁸ And,

“But my righteous one will live by faith.
And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.” [Hab.2:4]

³⁹ But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

11 ¹Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.



RECONSTRUCTION

1. In our key verse, Ephesians 6:16, we are instructed to “take up” faith, which suggests that the restoring of our faith necessitates action on our part. Here in our study passage, the writer of Hebrews provides four action steps by which we can enter “the Most Holy Place,” which is a metaphor for restoring a deep connection with God. What are those four actions? (vv.22-25)
2. Compare and contrast the four steps that you identified in the text with the ways in which we commonly talk about deepening our faith. In other words, if someone asked you, “How do I increase my faith?” what action steps would you have told them to take? How does your list compare with the steps outlined in the study passage?
3. “As I look back over my life, and I think things over, I can truly say...” Based on vv.32-34, how would the writer of Hebrews finish these lyrics?
4. We often think of faith as belief. How does v.38 challenge that notion?

RENEWAL

There is an old Sunday School song that says: “Read your Bible, pray every day, and you’ll grow, grow, grow.” However, this approach to faith formation is based on two faulty assumptions. First, it assumes that faith is only about belief and that the way to increase faith is to gain more knowledge from scripture, so that you can “grow” in your beliefs. Second, it assumes that Christian faith is about our own “personal relationship” with God, and all we need to do is increase our private communication with God and we will “grow” in Christian faith. Our lesson from Hebrews, however, teaches us that faith is not just about belief, but about action—love and good deeds. It further teaches us that such faith is best formed in community, for the



RENEWAL *(continued)*

gospel of Jesus Christ is about loving others, and not just about ourselves and God. Thus, the restoration of our faith must involve drawing near to God (v.22) *and* good deeds (v.24), holding onto our own hope (v.23) *and* encouraging one another (v.25). John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, advocated for such a well-balanced diet of spiritual disciplines. Here's his list:

- ♦ Works of Piety
 - Individual: Prayer, Fasting, Scripture, Healthy Living
 - Communal: Worship, Confession, Spiritual Guidance, Celebration
- ♦ Works of Mercy
 - Serving Individual Needs: Visiting the Sick & Imprisoned, Feeding & Clothing the Needy, Generosity to Neighbors (“earning, saving, and giving away all you can”)
 - Serving Communal/Societal Needs: Seeking Economic Justice, Opposing Slavery



NOTES:



REVIVAL

1. John Wesley's list of spiritual practices is illustrative, but not exhaustive. As we think of the four steps from our study passage—drawing near to God, holding onto hope by affirming God's faithfulness, spurring one another to love and good deeds, and meeting together to encourage one another—can you think of other activities and practices through which we might pursue all of those dimensions of faith formation?
2. What can our churches do to lead people in this fuller restoration of the life of faith?
3. What do you personally need to do to make your “diet” of spiritual disciplines more well-rounded?
4. What are the “flaming arrows” that you hope to confront and defeat as you restore your faith?