Walking together- we stand stronger

There is an old illustration that is told and retold again and again about a man who had been a long time absent from worship. One evening his pastor stopped by. The delinquent man knew why the preacher was there, but he let him inside anyway. Not a word was spoken by either man as they sat by the fire warming themselves from the night air. The delinquent was sure that the preacher was preparing himself for a fiery sermon warning the man against the sin of despising God’s word. The delinquent steeled himself for whatever the preacher would say. But the preacher just sat there poking at the fire. Some time passed and still not a word was spoken. The delinquent began to think the preacher had lost his nerve. Until he realized the fire that the preacher had been tending had grown very large and very hot. The delinquent watched as the preacher slowly removed one ember from the heart of the fire. He watched as the ember, once on fire and white hot, now separated from the heat of the fire began to smoke and cool. The delinquent starred at the cold dead ember for a moment. And he watched as the preacher gently scooped up the cold ember and placed it in the fire from which it had come. He watched as the ember caught fire and began to glow white hot once more. Still not saying a word the preacher stood up to leave. At the door it was the delinquent man who spoke. “Thank you for the fiery sermon preacher. I will be there this Sunday.”

Today as we continue our sermon series on Walking Together, we turn to Hebrews 10:19-25. With these verses God reminds us that Walking Together- we stand stronger.

The author of the book of Hebrews is unknown. As early as the second century it was attributed to Paul. But the different style and breaking of Paul’s custom of taking ownership of his letters has led some to believe the author was Barnabas; the traveling companion of Paul and one familiar with associates of Paul like Timothy. Luther guessed that it was Apollos; “A Jew… a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures” (Acts 18:24-25) because the letter is full of Old Testament references. But only God knows for sure.

The first audience of this letter is also unknown. The title “to the Hebrews”, was added in the second century. And with the many Old Testament references it does seem to suggest the readers were of Jewish descent. But from where we don’t know. What little we do know is that it is a group of people who have been believers in Jesus as their savior for some time, but were now in danger of growing cold in their faith. Whether it was from apathy or persecution their faith was all but snuffed out.

The man who wrote and the people who first read the letter we call Hebrews may be unknown to us. But the purpose of this letter is known. God had these words written to urge people of all time, to urge you and me, not to abandon our faith in Jesus. Today God calls to you, “Let us draw near to God.” And to you, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.” And to all, “Let us not give up meeting together.”

God begins encouraging us to keep walking together by reminding us of the confidence and assurance that we have. “19 Therefore, brothers, 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 in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”

The word translated for us as confidence in verse 19 has in it an implication of intimidating circumstances. Think about what it was like to be a Christian in those early days. Your family would have assumed that you have turned your back on God and the traditions that they held dear. Most of your friends would have assumed that you had run off and joined some sort of cult. They wouldn’t understand why you shared your possessions with others and they definitely did not understand why you were eating a man's body and drinking his blood. Church leaders would be threatening you that if you didn’t reject the outlaw Jesus they would do to you what they had done to him. Society itself would laugh at you. They would see you as weak willed people who needed some kind of mental crutch and with your turning the other check all the time – they would assume you were unable to stand up for yourself. So yeah there is an implication that the early Christians were experiencing some intimidating circumstances. And I am sure you can relate to some of that.

There is another way to translate the word confidence. You could replace it with the word boldness. And I like boldness better especially when you consider where these people were entering, the Most Holy place. The Most Holy place in the Jerusalem temple was the place where God dwelled. Only the high priest was allowed to enter it and only once a year. Commoners, regular old church members were not allowed to come into the presence of God or they would die. It was bold for these fallen sinful descendants of Adam and Eve to enter into the presence of the Holy God.

Often visitors understand this boldness. Typically when there is a funeral or wedding or some other special event here at church, people will tell me that they have not been to church in a long time and felt intimidated about stepping foot on church property. Sometimes people I invite to church tell me that they are not sure what would happen if they came to
church, they might get struck by lightning or something. I know part of them is joking but deep down they understand how bold it is for a sinner to stand before the Holy God. And you know what, it is too bad that we don't share a little of that concern ourselves. The un-churched person or de-churched person knows in their heart that they do not deserve to stand before the Holy God. God has written his law on their hearts and they know they are not worthy. Well what makes us so good? Are we so much better than the un-churched that we feel we can just stroll on in here. You know, this place isn't a Walmart. When we come here it is not simply to be lost in a sea of spandex wearing neighbors. We come into the presence of the Holy God. Are you really so confident in your purity, do you really think that you that good of a person? Perhaps a little intimidation would be a good thing for us? Sometimes I think we forget how bold we are when we come into the house of the Lord.

Outside of the blood of Jesus there is no reason for anyone to have confidence or boldness when they come into the presence of the Holy God. But God assures us that we are not outside of the blood of Jesus. We are bold to enter into the presence of God Holy God because Jesus is that special, he is that pure, and he is that good. We stand in the presence of Holy God by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body. In the Jerusalem temple there was a curtain that separated the Most Holy God from the people. The Gospel of Matthew tells us when Jesus died on the cross, “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” (Matthew 27:51) The body of Jesus was torn in two, whipped, beaten, and crucified so that we can be so bold as to stand in the presence of God. We are able to draw near to God because our hearts have been sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience. Be assured, because of Jesus, your bodies are washed with pure water.

God encourages, “23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” To help us hold unswervingly to the confident assurance we have to stand in the presence of the Holy God, God gives us each other. In verses 24-25 we read, “24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” I think it’s funny that God tells us to spur one another on toward love and good deeds. The NIV does a great job of translating this word as spur. You probably have in your mind the spurs that a cowboy wears to get his hoarse moving. This word has in it a sense of that irritation. Here it is not meant in a mean or ugly way but... we do need to get kicked in the rear-end every now and then don't we. Maybe when we take the fact that we get to stand in the presence of the Holy God for granted? Maybe when we are up late the night before or have plans latter in the day or on vacation? Maybe when we forget about what an amazing thing it is that we can stand in the presence of the Holy God and we decide that we need a Sunday off. Maybe at those times we need a swift kick in the pants to get us moving again. And who better to do it then our brothers and sisters in faith. As a matter of fact no one else better do it right? But when a trusted fellow Christian spurs us we know that it is for our good. Sometimes I need a kick in the pants. And sometimes you need a kick in the pants. So I will tell you what, you watch my backside and I will watch yours.

This is easier to do of course if our backsides are sitting next to each other week after week in worship. That's why God encourages us to not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another. You see by coming to church not only do you, by the body and blood of Jesus, get to stand in the presence of the Holy God but you also have the opportunity to encourage others who stand in the presence of the Holy God.

Worship isn't only about you. It's also about the people you are sitting next to. They struggle with intimidating circumstances. Some of them have families that do not understand why they would leave the family church in order to attend an obscure Lutheran church in Alabama. There are people sitting next to you who have friends that don't understand how they can be so closed minded to believe that only Christians will be in heaven. The people sitting next to you live under the threat of Muslims who call them infidels and threaten their lives. They live in a society that mocks their humility and calls their faith, fairy tales. They need you to assure them that they have been cleansed from guilt and washed clean by the blood of Jesus so that they can confidently stand in the presence of the Holy God. These people need you. And you need them. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

God knows walking together we stand stronger. And he provides for us fellow Christians who will spur us on and encourage us like a pile of hot embers keeping each other burning. Reminding each other of the confidence we have to stand in the presence of the Holy God washed and cleansed by the body and blood of Jesus.

Walking together… we stand stronger. Amen.

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1 Hebrews 10:19-25

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