

Discovering Our True Purpose

Sunday, November 17, 2024

Hebrews 10:19-25 & Mark 13:1-8

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

The community of the faithful is the church, not the building in which that community worships¹

I spent a few days in Pittsburgh last May at East Liberty Presbyterian attending a preaching conference. It's an astonishing church that was designed by the famous architect Ralph Adams Cram. Cram designed hundreds of church and college buildings, including Princeton, West Point, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and even the chapel at St. Louis University Hospital. He called East Liberty Presbyterian his greatest and most spiritually satisfying achievement. It is a cathedral, but it is primarily a local congregation. It fills an entire city block and is packed with stained glass windows, soaring arches, and marble floors. Built in the depths of the depression, it has Mellons buried in its walls (I'm talking about the kind that owned banks and made steel, not cantaloupes.)

Its size conveys a message of God's sheer size conveys a sense of the presence of God. From the outside, there is no doubt about its purpose. I found myself thinking about all the people I've met over the years who ask me where Woodlawn Chapel is located. When I tell them they usually say, "Oh, I've driven by there hundreds of times...I never knew that was a church.")

The medium is the message, which is exactly what both these scripture lessons want us to know. In Mark, the disciples run up to Jesus, gape-mouthed by the beauty and majesty of the temple. It's ornate buildings and carvings overwhelm these boys from Galilee—they've never seen anything like it. I imagine them to be standing around gawking a bit like I did when I walked into East Liberty Presbyterian Church, or the Cathedral Basilica in St. Louis, or one of the great European cathedrals.

¹ Elizabeth Felicetti, "[Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture](#)," in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year B: Season after Pentecost*, ed. Joel B. Green et al., First edition., vol. 3, Connections (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 483.

But Jesus cuts their admiration short. He tells them what they are looking at will one day be upended and tossed around the way a toddler tears apart Lego's. "Not even one stone will be left upon another," he remarks. "All will be demolished."

The disciples are stunned: if even the great religious institutions will not remain, then where do we find our security, our assurance, our hope?

Jesus seems to be infusing his believers with uncertainty and not faith, confusion and not a sense of holy purpose.

Something similar may have been happening in the lives of those who heard the Epistle of Hebrews for the first time. We call this a "general" letter because we know little, if anything about the original audience. Nor can we say anything confidently about the author—indeed, even the earliest church fathers said, "Who wrote the Epistle? In truth only God knows?"

Whatever the conditions of the audience or the identity of the author, we do know this: here was a church which felt as if the very stones supporting it had collapsed. They struggled from spiritual emptiness and weariness. They had lost confidence, and their attendance was dwindling. "They are tired," writes Tom Loing, "tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak."²

Faced with that sort of situation, we might be tempted to pull out a notebook filled with tried-and-true nuggets of church management technique. We might run to the bookstore and grab the latest study, or search online to hear the sermons of famous preachers. We might call in a consultant or have a visioning meeting. "What's our purpose?" we might ask, filling up flip charts with ideas and plans.

But the author of Hebrews does not do that. Instead, the author does something completely different than any other New Testament book. The author appears to offer them a sermon – not a sermon with cute jokes about the preacher's grandchildren or the classic "three points and a poem." When I was a seminary student, I had a chance to work at a church whose interim pastor had been a renowned "prince of the pulpit" decades earlier. Sadly, his time had largely passed, but his commanding presence was

² Thomas Long, *Hebrews*, p. 3.

still strong. Yet his style was remarkably similar. Each week he would read the text and begin the sermon by saying, and I quote, “This suggests to us the theme...”

The preacher of Hebrews does not do that. He avoids cliches and metaphors and instead dives deep into theology. He delves into the meaning of who Christ is, explores big theological words like “atonement,” and “sacrifice.” He goes deep into the religious imagination to help his church rebuild the foundations upon which their lives had crumbled. He does not give them a five-point plan to rebuild their lives, but instead offers them Jesus.

Their church is going nowhere. And it is getting their fast.

In today’s world, denominational officials would show up with PowerPoints and handouts. Someone would review the “Fourteen Steps to Becoming a Vibrant Church.” (An old friend of mine told me that the reason my books don’t sell very much is that their titles do not sound like “25 Ways Your Church Can Grow,” or “10 Prayers God will Always Answer.”)

But the preacher invites the congregation to fill their spiritual imagination with the reminders of the God who has accompanied them through suffering. He preaches about Jesus. He goes to the hidden places of the heart to stir the imagination of those whose lives are withered and depleted.

Here is where we find our true purpose. He avoids lathering guilt and instead reminds them they are accepted. He suggests that the bricks of disappointment and the stones of anxious worrying have been removed by the One whose sacrifice has been perfected. Our work will never be enough, but for that reason we have confidence in the one whose sacrifice was complete.

And it is in this community that we know our true purpose.

A large portion of people who no longer come to church, who may even identify themselves as that great part of the population known as the “no particular religious preference,” have not heard that assurance. They have been blindsided by the self-righteous judgments or pretense and hypocrisy.

The preacher is ringing a bell to them and to us. His bell reminds us that we find purpose in declaring the good news, in encouraging others, in doing all those things you might call the “lettuce bowl” of Hebrews 10: let us hold fast, let us approach, let us consider.”

And to those who have fallen away, he reminds them that it is only in community that we discover the abundance of hope. It is only in community that we find the strength to stand when the stones around us are falling.

These ancient words are the good news we need to hear today. These are the words which form our purpose. We exist not only to drink coffee and to plan events, but to draw near to the hope which is our “sure and steadfast hope set before us, a sure anchor of the soul...” (6:19).

My wife, Carol was the pastor of a small church about an hour south of Kansas City for a time. Like many small-town churches, this congregation had been beaten up a bit by a variety of forces, some of which were beyond its control. It had seen a parade of pastors coming and going, some of whom left sooner than they had hoped and others that stayed longer than they preferred. Their resources were dwindling and often they felt that they might be one leaky roof away from being closed. They were exhausted, and at times bone weary from trying to do so many things.

Yet, despite this, they kept gathering. Somewhere within them the encouragement of the preacher of Hebrews rang true. “We are confident,” says the preacher, “of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust; God will not overlook your work and the love you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.” So, they kept praying and singing. That year I taught their first confirmation class in decades.

On Sunday mornings, one of the ushers would come and find one of the children of the church, and take them to the back of the church to ring the church bell. I’m convinced many children come to church each week in hopes that they would be tapped to ring the bell.

That bell served two purposes. Its primary purpose was to announce that the church was about to gather. It was time for Sunday school to end, time for coffee cups to be set down. Those just pulling into the parking lot knew that they had to step it up a bit. It was the signal that something was about to happen inside the sanctuary of Butler Presbyterian Church.

The second purpose we learned was to send a signal to the Methodists. It told them that the Presbyterians were getting started and that they intended to beat the Methodists to the diner for lunch!

The bell declared the assurance of faith, and today it summons us to remember the promise that holds us. So let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering—even as the stones of the temple fall upon us. Amen.

Discovering Our True Purpose

Sunday, November 17, 2024

Hebrews 10:19-25 & Mark 13:1-8

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

The community of the faithful is the church, not the building in which that community worships¹

I spent a few days in Pittsburgh last May at East Liberty Presbyterian attending a preaching conference. It's an astonishing church that was designed by the famous architect Ralph Adams Cram. Cram designed hundreds of church and college buildings, including Princeton, West Point, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and even the chapel at St. Louis University Hospital. He called East Liberty Presbyterian his greatest and most spiritually satisfying achievement. It is a cathedral, but it is primarily a local congregation. It fills an entire city block and is packed with stained glass windows, soaring arches, and marble floors. Built in the depths of the depression, it has Mellons buried in its walls (I'm talking about the kind that owned banks and made steel, not cantaloupes.)

Its size conveys a message of God's sheer size conveys a sense of the presence of God. From the outside, there is no doubt about its purpose. I found myself thinking about all the people I've met over the years who ask me where Woodlawn Chapel is located. When I tell them they usually say, "Oh, I've driven by there hundreds of times...I never knew that was a church.")

The medium is the message, which is exactly what both these scripture lessons want us to know. In Mark, the disciples run up to Jesus, gape-mouthed by the beauty and majesty of the temple. It's ornate buildings and carvings overwhelm these boys from Galilee—they've never seen anything like it. I imagine them to be standing around gawking a bit like I did when I walked into East Liberty Presbyterian Church, or the Cathedral Basilica in St. Louis, or one of the great European cathedrals.

¹ Elizabeth Felicetti, "[Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture](#)," in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year B: Season after Pentecost*, ed. Joel B. Green et al., First edition., vol. 3, Connections (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 483.

But Jesus cuts their admiration short. He tells them what they are looking at will one day be upended and tossed around the way a toddler tears apart Lego's. "Not even one stone will be left upon another," he remarks. "All will be demolished."

The disciples are stunned: if even the great religious institutions will not remain, then where do we find our security, our assurance, our hope?

Jesus seems to be infusing his believers with uncertainty and not faith, confusion and not a sense of holy purpose.

Something similar may have been happening in the lives of those who heard the Epistle of Hebrews for the first time. We call this a "general" letter because we know little, if anything about the original audience. Nor can we say anything confidently about the author—indeed, even the earliest church fathers said, "Who wrote the Epistle? In truth only God knows?"

Whatever the conditions of the audience or the identity of the author, we do know this: here was a church which felt as if the very stones supporting it had collapsed. They struggled from spiritual emptiness and weariness. They had lost confidence, and their attendance was dwindling. "They are tired," writes Tom Loing, "tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak."²

Faced with that sort of situation, we might be tempted to pull out a notebook filled with tried-and-true nuggets of church management technique. We might run to the bookstore and grab the latest study, or search online to hear the sermons of famous preachers. We might call in a consultant or have a visioning meeting. "What's our purpose?" we might ask, filling up flip charts with ideas and plans.

But the author of Hebrews does not do that. Instead, the author does something completely different than any other New Testament book. The author appears to offer them a sermon – not a sermon with cute jokes about the preacher's grandchildren or the classic "three points and a poem." When I was a seminary student, I had a chance to work at a church whose interim pastor had been a renowned "prince of the pulpit" decades earlier. Sadly, his time had largely passed, but his commanding presence was

² Thomas Long, *Hebrews*, p. 3.

still strong. Yet his style was remarkably similar. Each week he would read the text and begin the sermon by saying, and I quote, “This suggests to us the theme...”

The preacher of Hebrews does not do that. He avoids cliches and metaphors and instead dives deep into theology. He delves into the meaning of who Christ is, explores big theological words like “atonement,” and “sacrifice.” He goes deep into the religious imagination to help his church rebuild the foundations upon which their lives had crumbled. He does not give them a five-point plan to rebuild their lives, but instead offers them Jesus.

Their church is going nowhere. And it is getting their fast.

In today’s world, denominational officials would show up with PowerPoints and handouts. Someone would review the “Fourteen Steps to Becoming a Vibrant Church.” (An old friend of mine told me that the reason my books don’t sell very much is that their titles do not sound like “25 Ways Your Church Can Grow,” or “10 Prayers God will Always Answer.”)

But the preacher invites the congregation to fill their spiritual imagination with the reminders of the God who has accompanied them through suffering. He preaches about Jesus. He goes to the hidden places of the heart to stir the imagination of those whose lives are withered and depleted.

Here is where we find our true purpose. He avoids lathering guilt and instead reminds them they are accepted. He suggests that the bricks of disappointment and the stones of anxious worrying have been removed by the One whose sacrifice has been perfected. Our work will never be enough, but for that reason we have confidence in the one whose sacrifice was complete.

And it is in this community that we know our true purpose.

A large portion of people who no longer come to church, who may even identify themselves as that great part of the population known as the “no particular religious preference,” have not heard that assurance. They have been blindsided by the self-righteous judgments or pretense and hypocrisy.

The preacher is ringing a bell to them and to us. His bell reminds us that we find purpose in declaring the good news, in encouraging others, in doing all those things you might call the “lettuce bowl” of Hebrews 10: let us hold fast, let us approach, let us consider.”

And to those who have fallen away, he reminds them that it is only in community that we discover the abundance of hope. It is only in community that we find the strength to stand when the stones around us are falling.

These ancient words are the good news we need to hear today. These are the words which form our purpose. We exist not only to drink coffee and to plan events, but to draw near to the hope which is our “sure and steadfast hope set before us, a sure anchor of the soul...” (6:19).

My wife, Carol was the pastor of a small church about an hour south of Kansas City for a time. Like many small-town churches, this congregation had been beaten up a bit by a variety of forces, some of which were beyond its control. It had seen a parade of pastors coming and going, some of whom left sooner than they had hoped and others that stayed longer than they preferred. Their resources were dwindling and often they felt that they might be one leaky roof away from being closed. They were exhausted, and at times bone weary from trying to do so many things.

Yet, despite this, they kept gathering. Somewhere within them the encouragement of the preacher of Hebrews rang true. “We are confident,” says the preacher, “of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust; God will not overlook your work and the love you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.” So, they kept praying and singing. That year I taught their first confirmation class in decades.

On Sunday mornings, one of the ushers would come and find one of the children of the church, and take them to the back of the church to ring the church bell. I’m convinced many children come to church each week in hopes that they would be tapped to ring the bell.

That bell served two purposes. Its primary purpose was to announce that the church was about to gather. It was time for Sunday school to end, time for coffee cups to be set down. Those just pulling into the parking lot knew that they had to step it up a bit. It was the signal that something was about to happen inside the sanctuary of Butler Presbyterian Church.

The second purpose we learned was to send a signal to the Methodists. It told them that the Presbyterians were getting started and that they intended to beat the Methodists to the diner for lunch!

The bell declared the assurance of faith, and today it summons us to remember the promise that holds us. So let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering—even as the stones of the temple fall upon us. Amen.

Discovering Our True Purpose

Sunday, November 17, 2024

Hebrews 10:19-25 & Mark 13:1-8

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

The community of the faithful is the church, not the building in which that community worships¹

I spent a few days in Pittsburgh last May at East Liberty Presbyterian attending a preaching conference. It's an astonishing church that was designed by the famous architect Ralph Adams Cram. Cram designed hundreds of church and college buildings, including Princeton, West Point, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and even the chapel at St. Louis University Hospital. He called East Liberty Presbyterian his greatest and most spiritually satisfying achievement. It is a cathedral, but it is primarily a local congregation. It fills an entire city block and is packed with stained glass windows, soaring arches, and marble floors. Built in the depths of the depression, it has Mellons buried in its walls (I'm talking about the kind that owned banks and made steel, not cantaloupes.)

Its size conveys a message of God's sheer size conveys a sense of the presence of God. From the outside, there is no doubt about its purpose. I found myself thinking about all the people I've met over the years who ask me where Woodlawn Chapel is located. When I tell them they usually say, "Oh, I've driven by there hundreds of times...I never knew that was a church.")

The medium is the message, which is exactly what both these scripture lessons want us to know. In Mark, the disciples run up to Jesus, gape-mouthed by the beauty and majesty of the temple. It's ornate buildings and carvings overwhelm these boys from Galilee—they've never seen anything like it. I imagine them to be standing around gawking a bit like I did when I walked into East Liberty Presbyterian Church, or the Cathedral Basilica in St. Louis, or one of the great European cathedrals.

¹ Elizabeth Felicetti, "[Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture](#)," in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year B: Season after Pentecost*, ed. Joel B. Green et al., First edition., vol. 3, Connections (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 483.

But Jesus cuts their admiration short. He tells them what they are looking at will one day be upended and tossed around the way a toddler tears apart Lego's. "Not even one stone will be left upon another," he remarks. "All will be demolished."

The disciples are stunned: if even the great religious institutions will not remain, then where do we find our security, our assurance, our hope?

Jesus seems to be infusing his believers with uncertainty and not faith, confusion and not a sense of holy purpose.

Something similar may have been happening in the lives of those who heard the Epistle of Hebrews for the first time. We call this a "general" letter because we know little, if anything about the original audience. Nor can we say anything confidently about the author—indeed, even the earliest church fathers said, "Who wrote the Epistle? In truth only God knows?"

Whatever the conditions of the audience or the identity of the author, we do know this: here was a church which felt as if the very stones supporting it had collapsed. They struggled from spiritual emptiness and weariness. They had lost confidence, and their attendance was dwindling. "They are tired," writes Tom Loing, "tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak."²

Faced with that sort of situation, we might be tempted to pull out a notebook filled with tried-and-true nuggets of church management technique. We might run to the bookstore and grab the latest study, or search online to hear the sermons of famous preachers. We might call in a consultant or have a visioning meeting. "What's our purpose?" we might ask, filling up flip charts with ideas and plans.

But the author of Hebrews does not do that. Instead, the author does something completely different than any other New Testament book. The author appears to offer them a sermon – not a sermon with cute jokes about the preacher's grandchildren or the classic "three points and a poem." When I was a seminary student, I had a chance to work at a church whose interim pastor had been a renowned "prince of the pulpit" decades earlier. Sadly, his time had largely passed, but his commanding presence was

² Thomas Long, *Hebrews*, p. 3.

still strong. Yet his style was remarkably similar. Each week he would read the text and begin the sermon by saying, and I quote, “This suggests to us the theme...”

The preacher of Hebrews does not do that. He avoids cliches and metaphors and instead dives deep into theology. He delves into the meaning of who Christ is, explores big theological words like “atonement,” and “sacrifice.” He goes deep into the religious imagination to help his church rebuild the foundations upon which their lives had crumbled. He does not give them a five-point plan to rebuild their lives, but instead offers them Jesus.

Their church is going nowhere. And it is getting their fast.

In today’s world, denominational officials would show up with PowerPoints and handouts. Someone would review the “Fourteen Steps to Becoming a Vibrant Church.” (An old friend of mine told me that the reason my books don’t sell very much is that their titles do not sound like “25 Ways Your Church Can Grow,” or “10 Prayers God will Always Answer.”)

But the preacher invites the congregation to fill their spiritual imagination with the reminders of the God who has accompanied them through suffering. He preaches about Jesus. He goes to the hidden places of the heart to stir the imagination of those whose lives are withered and depleted.

Here is where we find our true purpose. He avoids lathering guilt and instead reminds them they are accepted. He suggests that the bricks of disappointment and the stones of anxious worrying have been removed by the One whose sacrifice has been perfected. Our work will never be enough, but for that reason we have confidence in the one whose sacrifice was complete.

And it is in this community that we know our true purpose.

A large portion of people who no longer come to church, who may even identify themselves as that great part of the population known as the “no particular religious preference,” have not heard that assurance. They have been blindsided by the self-righteous judgments or pretense and hypocrisy.

The preacher is ringing a bell to them and to us. His bell reminds us that we find purpose in declaring the good news, in encouraging others, in doing all those things you might call the “lettuce bowl” of Hebrews 10: let us hold fast, let us approach, let us consider.”

And to those who have fallen away, he reminds them that it is only in community that we discover the abundance of hope. It is only in community that we find the strength to stand when the stones around us are falling.

These ancient words are the good news we need to hear today. These are the words which form our purpose. We exist not only to drink coffee and to plan events, but to draw near to the hope which is our “sure and steadfast hope set before us, a sure anchor of the soul...” (6:19).

My wife, Carol was the pastor of a small church about an hour south of Kansas City for a time. Like many small-town churches, this congregation had been beaten up a bit by a variety of forces, some of which were beyond its control. It had seen a parade of pastors coming and going, some of whom left sooner than they had hoped and others that stayed longer than they preferred. Their resources were dwindling and often they felt that they might be one leaky roof away from being closed. They were exhausted, and at times bone weary from trying to do so many things.

Yet, despite this, they kept gathering. Somewhere within them the encouragement of the preacher of Hebrews rang true. “We are confident,” says the preacher, “of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust; God will not overlook your work and the love you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.” So, they kept praying and singing. That year I taught their first confirmation class in decades.

On Sunday mornings, one of the ushers would come and find one of the children of the church, and take them to the back of the church to ring the church bell. I’m convinced many children come to church each week in hopes that they would be tapped to ring the bell.

That bell served two purposes. Its primary purpose was to announce that the church was about to gather. It was time for Sunday school to end, time for coffee cups to be set down. Those just pulling into the parking lot knew that they had to step it up a bit. It was the signal that something was about to happen inside the sanctuary of Butler Presbyterian Church.

The second purpose we learned was to send a signal to the Methodists. It told them that the Presbyterians were getting started and that they intended to beat the Methodists to the diner for lunch!

The bell declared the assurance of faith, and today it summons us to remember the promise that holds us. So let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering—even as the stones of the temple fall upon us. Amen.

Discovering Our True Purpose

Sunday, November 17, 2024

Hebrews 10:19-25 & Mark 13:1-8

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

The community of the faithful is the church, not the building in which that community worships¹

I spent a few days in Pittsburgh last May at East Liberty Presbyterian attending a preaching conference. It's an astonishing church that was designed by the famous architect Ralph Adams Cram. Cram designed hundreds of church and college buildings, including Princeton, West Point, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and even the chapel at St. Louis University Hospital. He called East Liberty Presbyterian his greatest and most spiritually satisfying achievement. It is a cathedral, but it is primarily a local congregation. It fills an entire city block and is packed with stained glass windows, soaring arches, and marble floors. Built in the depths of the depression, it has Mellons buried in its walls (I'm talking about the kind that owned banks and made steel, not cantaloupes.)

Its size conveys a message of God's sheer size conveys a sense of the presence of God. From the outside, there is no doubt about its purpose. I found myself thinking about all the people I've met over the years who ask me where Woodlawn Chapel is located. When I tell them they usually say, "Oh, I've driven by there hundreds of times...I never knew that was a church.")

The medium is the message, which is exactly what both these scripture lessons want us to know. In Mark, the disciples run up to Jesus, gape-mouthed by the beauty and majesty of the temple. It's ornate buildings and carvings overwhelm these boys from Galilee—they've never seen anything like it. I imagine them to be standing around gawking a bit like I did when I walked into East Liberty Presbyterian Church, or the Cathedral Basilica in St. Louis, or one of the great European cathedrals.

¹ Elizabeth Felicetti, "[Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture](#)," in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year B: Season after Pentecost*, ed. Joel B. Green et al., First edition., vol. 3, Connections (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 483.

But Jesus cuts their admiration short. He tells them what they are looking at will one day be upended and tossed around the way a toddler tears apart Lego's. "Not even one stone will be left upon another," he remarks. "All will be demolished."

The disciples are stunned: if even the great religious institutions will not remain, then where do we find our security, our assurance, our hope?

Jesus seems to be infusing his believers with uncertainty and not faith, confusion and not a sense of holy purpose.

Something similar may have been happening in the lives of those who heard the Epistle of Hebrews for the first time. We call this a "general" letter because we know little, if anything about the original audience. Nor can we say anything confidently about the author—indeed, even the earliest church fathers said, "Who wrote the Epistle? In truth only God knows?"

Whatever the conditions of the audience or the identity of the author, we do know this: here was a church which felt as if the very stones supporting it had collapsed. They struggled from spiritual emptiness and weariness. They had lost confidence, and their attendance was dwindling. "They are tired," writes Tom Loing, "tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak."²

Faced with that sort of situation, we might be tempted to pull out a notebook filled with tried-and-true nuggets of church management technique. We might run to the bookstore and grab the latest study, or search online to hear the sermons of famous preachers. We might call in a consultant or have a visioning meeting. "What's our purpose?" we might ask, filling up flip charts with ideas and plans.

But the author of Hebrews does not do that. Instead, the author does something completely different than any other New Testament book. The author appears to offer them a sermon – not a sermon with cute jokes about the preacher's grandchildren or the classic "three points and a poem." When I was a seminary student, I had a chance to work at a church whose interim pastor had been a renowned "prince of the pulpit" decades earlier. Sadly, his time had largely passed, but his commanding presence was

² Thomas Long, *Hebrews*, p. 3.

still strong. Yet his style was remarkably similar. Each week he would read the text and begin the sermon by saying, and I quote, “This suggests to us the theme...”

The preacher of Hebrews does not do that. He avoids cliches and metaphors and instead dives deep into theology. He delves into the meaning of who Christ is, explores big theological words like “atonement,” and “sacrifice.” He goes deep into the religious imagination to help his church rebuild the foundations upon which their lives had crumbled. He does not give them a five-point plan to rebuild their lives, but instead offers them Jesus.

Their church is going nowhere. And it is getting their fast.

In today’s world, denominational officials would show up with PowerPoints and handouts. Someone would review the “Fourteen Steps to Becoming a Vibrant Church.” (An old friend of mine told me that the reason my books don’t sell very much is that their titles do not sound like “25 Ways Your Church Can Grow,” or “10 Prayers God will Always Answer.”)

But the preacher invites the congregation to fill their spiritual imagination with the reminders of the God who has accompanied them through suffering. He preaches about Jesus. He goes to the hidden places of the heart to stir the imagination of those whose lives are withered and depleted.

Here is where we find our true purpose. He avoids lathering guilt and instead reminds them they are accepted. He suggests that the bricks of disappointment and the stones of anxious worrying have been removed by the One whose sacrifice has been perfected. Our work will never be enough, but for that reason we have confidence in the one whose sacrifice was complete.

And it is in this community that we know our true purpose.

A large portion of people who no longer come to church, who may even identify themselves as that great part of the population known as the “no particular religious preference,” have not heard that assurance. They have been blindsided by the self-righteous judgments or pretense and hypocrisy.

The preacher is ringing a bell to them and to us. His bell reminds us that we find purpose in declaring the good news, in encouraging others, in doing all those things you might call the “lettuce bowl” of Hebrews 10: let us hold fast, let us approach, let us consider.”

And to those who have fallen away, he reminds them that it is only in community that we discover the abundance of hope. It is only in community that we find the strength to stand when the stones around us are falling.

These ancient words are the good news we need to hear today. These are the words which form our purpose. We exist not only to drink coffee and to plan events, but to draw near to the hope which is our “sure and steadfast hope set before us, a sure anchor of the soul...” (6:19).

My wife, Carol was the pastor of a small church about an hour south of Kansas City for a time. Like many small-town churches, this congregation had been beaten up a bit by a variety of forces, some of which were beyond its control. It had seen a parade of pastors coming and going, some of whom left sooner than they had hoped and others that stayed longer than they preferred. Their resources were dwindling and often they felt that they might be one leaky roof away from being closed. They were exhausted, and at times bone weary from trying to do so many things.

Yet, despite this, they kept gathering. Somewhere within them the encouragement of the preacher of Hebrews rang true. “We are confident,” says the preacher, “of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust; God will not overlook your work and the love you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.” So, they kept praying and singing. That year I taught their first confirmation class in decades.

On Sunday mornings, one of the ushers would come and find one of the children of the church, and take them to the back of the church to ring the church bell. I’m convinced many children come to church each week in hopes that they would be tapped to ring the bell.

That bell served two purposes. Its primary purpose was to announce that the church was about to gather. It was time for Sunday school to end, time for coffee cups to be set down. Those just pulling into the parking lot knew that they had to step it up a bit. It was the signal that something was about to happen inside the sanctuary of Butler Presbyterian Church.

The second purpose we learned was to send a signal to the Methodists. It told them that the Presbyterians were getting started and that they intended to beat the Methodists to the diner for lunch!

The bell declared the assurance of faith, and today it summons us to remember the promise that holds us. So let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering—even as the stones of the temple fall upon us. Amen.