

**“SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN...”**

**Text: “I know whom I have believed and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.”**

**II Timothy I: 14**

**Rev. Richard M. Cromie, Ph.D., D.D.  
Sharon Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
September 7, 2008**

We all need something to believe in. That’s what the Bible means when it says that “you cannot live by bread

alone.” The here and now, touchable and tangible items; the daily grind, the morning noon and night of things, however fine and fancy, cannot carry the freight or fill your soul. Wealth cannot do it. Success can complicate it. Natural beauty fades away. Popularity is exhausting. Other treasures will fail and disappoint you.

When you feel restless or agitated and wonder what is missing, whisper it quietly – “I need my something to believe in.” You need a spiritual home to keep you safe and sound and sane, as surely as you need a roof above your head. “O Lord, our hearts are restless,” old St. Augustine said, “until they find their rest in you.” Sometimes people find it but then lose it; some misplace it in the scurry to make a good life around them; some, they never find it at all. Whichever, shout it from the rooftops: “I need something to believe in!”

It gets lonely out there as the world keeps spinning on, seemingly unaware of who we are and what we need in our own small worlds. It does not seem to matter who you are or what you have. Loneliness does not discriminate. It plagues the poorest and the oldest, the strongest and the weakest ones among us. It creeps into the largest homes and uptown, downtown penthouses. The happiest of families still have their troubles. Nature is a treasure, but the friendly elements of the universe are not sufficient either. Surprises are always on the move, slouching through the times: floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, illness, and bad news when the telephone rings before the crack of dawn.

You look out one starry night and behold the infinite heavens, a space and place of wonder and of grace. But you cannot capture and transfer that inside yourself to fill the void. The Psalmist wrote: “When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy fingers; the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, what is man that Thou art mindful of him or the son of man that Thou dost care for him? Yet you have made us a little lower than the angels....” True, but still, there is the hint of a reminder there that this vast universe can be unfriendly and unforgivable. It keeps keeping on its own inexorable rotation, not caring what you do. We attach ourselves to the Terra Firma, the solid earth, while all the while our planet spins around the not-so-empty heavens at 25,000 miles per hour a clip. Life can be, has been, and will be unkind. A dear friend of ours up North went to the Doctor a couple of weeks ago, and this past week they told him he most likely has less than a year to live. God does not seem to manipulate events in favor of his faithful followers. I wonder why. I think I would, if I were God.

Do you identify with what I mean? Life promises a lot. Sometimes the best ones come true. But, sometimes they don't! Dostoevsky said bluntly that, “Life promises more than it delivers.” It can trick and disappoint you, wandering through the expanding dark holes of outer space, wondering what on earth is going on, on earth. We all need a spiritual home, a place to start each day with gusto and grace, a happy-to-be-here kind of feeling, an anchor to the leeward side of time and circumstances.

And yet it ranges on out there, just as bad on the outside as on the inside of the mind or soul or psyche. It does not add up: ennui sets in. Philosophers call it “anomie.” Freud called it “alienation.” Jung said “All things cast a shadow.” Call it anything you like. It will answer even when you do not know its proper name. It has a thousand monikers, but like your faithful doggie, it will come no matter what you call it.

As you wander down the corridors of memory and remember all the dumb things you have done, and the good

things you didn't do, awful words spoken that cannot be recalled, all the brokenness of what went wrong, some of which you caused and some of which you didn't, it's all there, in what Eiseley called "The attic of the mind," stored up as little packrats tend to do. Nothing ever is lost. So, you cannot forget even if you cannot remember why. Call it boredom. Call it anxiety, call it depression or despair. Permit me to call it homelessness, a Spiritual homelessness I mean, which brings us back to our theme: We all need something to believe in. We all need a spiritual home. "Blessed are the Homesick," Helmut Thielecke wrote, "for they shall all come home!" Amen.

\*\*\*\*\*

We all need something to believe in, (Take Two) - Jesus knew it well. His primary purpose on earth was to alert us to set our spiritual priorities, what we value most in life. This transient mortal life comes and goes. Kingdoms rise and fall. Friends and family are here and there, and gone. Whirl is king! Sometimes progress makes you sad. It can take more than your breath away. And there still awaits that one solitary journey which each must make alone.

The author of Hebrews knew it, too. He said his whole wide world was shaking, and it was. Things around him were breaking loose: persecution, famine, fire, and peril and sword were his daily grind, plus all of his personal and family worries. They were far more burdensome to him than anything we are likely to experience. He wrote about how the faithful people suffered and how discouraged they became. ("Why doesn't God do something about it, for his chosen ones?" I don't know, do you?)

So the author of Hebrews idles on, going sideways around this issue, backwards after that, taking ground, losing ground. Until finally he stumbled on an answer: In tumultuous times, he writes: "These things are shaken." Why? "So that which cannot be shaken will remain." So that which cannot be shaken may remain! (Hebrews 12:27) (Are you listening?) That's all he really knew: that the shaking up of things belonged to the time and providence of God. That's all; that's all.

"The Transitoriness of Time," Paul Tillich called it. The Bible thunders its echoes, time and again: "The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the Word of our God endures forever." "A generation comes, a generation goes, but the earth remains forever." You need a spiritual home, a foreverness to wrap its arms around you. "If I had a place to stand," Archimedes bragged, "I could move the world." Ha, Ha. Perhaps he could have – but, he never found the proper place to stand, no way to leverage it to his advantage.

We all need a faith to believe in and wrap our arms around. Not just a place to go to church to hear a fancy sermon; or a comfy seat to listen to religious music; not just a little pew in the corner, meant for you. You need a Spiritual home which transcends all your dwelling places, a place where you belong, where the universe, at the least, appears to be compatible with your highest hopes.

So tell me friend: what do you believe in? What matters most in life to you? The answers are legion:

Most of us believe in our nation. During these past two weeks candidates have vied to convince us who believes in

the nation more, and what kind of nation we will be: self-reliant or dependent? But no matter what side you might be on, most of us catch the grandeur of these United States of America, of our love of freedom and our challenges for the future. We are not perfect, but, with Lincoln, we can believe that, “We are still the last best hope on Earth.”

Admittedly, patriotism can be overdone. Many of the world’s worst problems, while complex and complicated, could be described as extreme national ethnic loyalties at war with each other, right? That kind of raucous belief has fueled endless wars all around the globe. In the old Austro-Hungarian community there have been more battles, more slaughters, from time out of mind, for more centuries than you can imagine. The most rousing song I ever heard in Church was the day a young Hungarian man died. The Sanctuary was packed. And as was their custom, they sang the Hungarian National Anthem at his funeral. What a trip! They roared it out with such fervor, it actually frightened me.

Or the Irish, north and south. It is quieter now, but my cousin Howard told me that they are just resting until the next generation of patriots rise up. Or the Shi’a and the Sunni Muslims, why can’t they get along? They have the same religious book, same founder and same history. They are religious, committed believers, totally devoted to their way of life and faith and heritage, and yet they hate each other.

However, my point was (it did get lost)...most of us believe in our own nation. Oh, sure, we have been known to cut a corner here and there and compromise, as our officials often do. But if I said to you, “Charlie, Alice, Peter, what do you believe in?” My guess is that most of you within the sound of my words would say “God Bless America, Land That I Love.”

Then, most of us would also say that we believe in family. Everybody knows that. But it will sound disappointing to some who hear me say it, the ones who gave almost everything for family and were left with nothing. You devoted time, money, years and energy and then received next to little in return. Years ago a young woman told me: “I was a model wife, but then he found a model model and away he went.”

But, whatever, the most of us would say we believe in family, to the third and fourth generation of those who love the Lord. I would give anything/everything for my wife, my children and grandchildren. Family is the way God groups us together, so that we can care for one another, love each other, hold on to each other. Family is sacred, as is the universal family of man. Sometimes it takes a long, long time for everything to come around...but “family” never ends.

Then most of us would say we believe in our Church. That is, no doubt, why you’re here today, unless someone coerced you into coming. God loves to hear those words about how we believe in Church. But we can over-do that too. Some believe in the Church with such fervor that it becomes their Church, meaning “Our Church”, meaning not “Their Church.” When in reality, it is nobody’s church. It belongs to God alone. It is the Church of Jesus Christ; each and all of us are guests. His Church is not intended to be a familiar family-reunion kind of gathering each Sunday morning, where guests are welcome, so long as they know they are guests. It is not intended to make us relax and be comfortable. It is supposed to be a prod to shoo you out into the world to share the love and peace

of Christ. It is the House of God, and it belongs to him and his purposes, not our own.

Others believe in the higher concept of duty, honor and country. I knew a man in Scotland who had been a soldier in World War II. He was wounded and relocated back to London, where he became a uniformed air raid warden. We became friends in 1958. I asked Mr. Humphreys one day what it was like to look across the battle-lines on the Continent and see enemies with rifles and grenades, intent on killing you. And, what it was like to hide in a bomb shelter in London, huddled in a crowded dark subway station.

His answer startled me. (I was younger then and did not yet know the point which lies behind this sermon.) He said, "It was wonderful." I said, "What?" He said, "It was wonderful." "Why?" He said, "Because we all knew what we were supposed to be doing. We had something to believe in." (His words.) "We were committed to whopping Jerry. Our sole purpose was to get Hitler off the scene. We knew what The Man Upstairs wanted us to do. Now we don't know our purpose anymore. I wander all around the university, dusting up the place. Life had meaning then." Browning added "Life has its meaning. To find that meaning is your meat and drink!"

So, again, I ask you: what do you believe in? Some would be reluctant to express it openly, but many believe mainly in their athletic teams and clubs and colleges. I would not dare to relate the point to the Universities and colleges of the North Carolina. Let me take you to my old hometown. I think of a middle-aged man at the old Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, one Saturday several years ago when the Pittsburgh Panthers (not the Carolina Panthers ones) were losing the football game against Penn State. My guess is that when he had been a student at the University of Pittsburgh a couple of decades earlier, he had been a cheerleader. As things kept getting worse for Pitt, his frustration turned to panic. He turned around time and again shouting at our section trying to badger the whole group into yelling, "Hail to Pitt! Hail to Pitt! Every loyal son! Or 2, 4, 6, 8, who do we appreciate?" Now don't get me wrong, I like to cheer at ballgames, or I used to anyway, but my life never depended on it. To him it was his *raison d'etre*.

The only folk who responded were those who had been fueled by four or five pints of Iron City Beer. Then exasperated, he finally screamed, "The trouble with you people is that you don't believe enough! You don't care if Pitt wins or not!" Well, maybe we cared and maybe we didn't; but it was not like the end of the world was coming. But, that man was a believer. He had found something to believe in.

\*\*\*\*\*

I chose our text for the sermon from the Book of Second Timothy, Chapter One. Familiar words to many. Paul had faced tremendous difficulties, as you know; he was beaten, run out of town several times, he was in poor health. He was alone and in prison because he refused to compromise his belief in Jesus Christ, his Lord. You might say he was a fanatic. In the words I have chosen for our text, Paul writes that he was not ashamed of where he was, because, he added: "I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day." He appears confident that he had it right. The exact meaning, Biblical scholars will know, is uncertain in the earliest Greek record we have. It could mean "What God has entrusted to

me; or what I have entrusted to God.”

Either way, the language is borrowed from the financial world of his time. Back then, there were no banks as such, not as we know them. And, there were no safety deposit boxes where you could lease to store your valuables and cash, and no security systems at home. Thieves could sneak in and steal your savings away, as Jesus mentioned. The Temple in each town provided a guardian service. For a fee, the temple administrators would store your deposits. The word they used was “guard,” “keep in safety,” “guarantee the return of your property.” The Greek is *parathaka*. Then, when you needed or wanted your money back, the Temple keepers deducted their fee and returned it to you.

Similarly, Paul says, there are dangers and difficulties in keeping true to the promises you make to the Lord. Anyone, anytime can be cut loose and drift away from the solid anchor. But never in the ultimate safekeeping. What you entrust to Jesus Christ will never fade or fail you in the end. “Where your Treasure is,” Matthew says, “There will your heart be also.” So don’t try to store up your treasures on earth, store them up in heaven, where they will be waiting for you.

One reading of the text is to interpret that it means we can put our trust in God, with his written guarantee of safekeeping; but Verse 14 can also mean that God entrusts some sacred duty and treasure to us. He asks us to carry on the good news of the Gospel. Like the author of Hebrews says in the Roll Call of the Heroes of the faith: No matter how well they responded before us, no matter how faithful, “Without us, they will not be made perfect.” You see, it is up to you to carry the message on.

Young people everywhere are looking for something to believe in. There are little children all around the globe who are lost. I read with sadness the other day that the rate of American teen suicides is rising rapidly. No words are so haunting or so fearful to a parent, a grandparent, brothers, sisters, to any and all of us; no word bores its way into your soul and psyche, and strikes such terror in the heart as the word “Lost”. If your child is lost, you drop everything and set out to find him or her. You call on all the resources which are available, marshal every last dollar and every prayer and every waking moment to make sure the lost is found.

But others are lost without knowing, wandering around as if they knew where they were and where they wanted to go. Walker Percy wrote a novel years ago titled, Lost in the Cosmos, in which he satirized the self-help books which were the rage a while back. The advance of technology and the discomfort which many moderns have with traditional religion, he wrote, have left us Lost in the Cosmos at large, lost within ourselves, cut loose from our proverbial roots. We have disconnected ourselves from the source of our power and peace.

Others are rounding the final turn, growing older, coming to the top of the home stretch, wondering what is going on on earth. An old friend called me from Florida the other day and told me he was ready to go, but he added: “What’s going to happen when I finally die? Where will I go then?” Fearful of declining health. Fearful of being alone. Fearful of what God does or does not have in mind for them.

Jesus said the same in the parables of Luke 15. “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one who is lost, until he finds it?” “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, and losing one, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?” (Luke 15: 1-11) Then he added the most famous one of all: The Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Well it’s time to go. Let me close it with a little story, part fiction, part real. Some years ago I had a dream, or I think it was a dream. Life had come around the final bend and there I was in this heavenly kind of courtroom. The Judge was a magnificent presence sitting up above on his bench. The witnesses were legion. I was in the dock. They were giving testimony about me and all that I had done wrong and all that I had left undone. It was awful. I thought they were being petty in remembering all the evidence; they must have been taking notes all through my life.

The Judge began to look a little stern, or it seemed to me that it did. It was an awful feeling. The witnesses came from everywhere, even my childhood. They had built a good case, a foolproof one, against me. Oh dear. I was a goner. Finally I heard the words from the one who was leading the accusations. He said, “The prosecution rests.”

I was there, but I was not permitted to speak in my own defense. I don’t know why but they would not let me explain why I did this or that, or the stress I was under, or how I did not feel well that day, or that it was not the way it appeared to be. It was Video only, no audio. Just the facts: bold, plain and simple.

Then, I heard the Judge ask: “Who will speak for the defense? Is there anyone here who will speak for the defendant? I didn’t hear a word. No one piped up for me. It was awful. I was crushed. Where were all my friends and family? Were they not permitted to speak either? I never felt so alone in all my life.

But, in a little while, I heard footsteps of one coming down the aisle from the rear of the Courtroom. And I heard a soft and reassuring voice I thought I recognized, even though I had never heard it out loud before in all my life. The one I still could not see, called out to the Judge: “I will, your honor, I will speak for the defendant. He’s a friend of mine. He believes in me.” And as Jesus Christ approached the bench, I think I heard him whisper to the Judge, “Hello Father, it’s nice to see you today.”

Oh dearie me, O glory be: my trial was rigged. The one defending me, my defense attorney, was related to the Judge. It was his dad. And he had just told his father that he would vouch for me and speak on my behalf. Glory be to God.

And, the dream ended when I heard The Judge say quietly: “Case dismissed! Please escort the defendant to his heavenly home – for now and forever more.” Amen