



**Date:** December 28-29, 2019  
**Speaker:** Karen Bird, Elder  
**Scripture:** Hebrews 10:19-25

*Hebrews 10:19-25*

*Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings ... Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.*

The book of Hebrews was a letter written to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who were figuring out how to follow the way of Jesus within a Jewish culture who strongly disagreed with their faith. The writer of the letter describes the fingerprints of God in their story in a way that meant the most to them. In their case, it was by showing how the Jesus they had been placing their hope in was the incredible fulfillment of their own Jewish story.

These verses in chapter 10 are reminding the new believers of their hope in Christ and encouraging them to hold onto that hope because these folks were starting to doubt their faith in Jesus - even thinking about turning back to Judaism.

Today we find ourselves with some similarities to the Jewish Christians. Here in Canada in the 21st century there's a growing pressure to abandon, or at least water down *our* faith. We are in a time where

**Christianity is accused of being intellectually unreasonable, practically irrelevant and sometimes even harmful.** The loudest voices in communications, entertainment, and even academia defame the Christian story, our history, our morality, our values, our priorities, and our practices. In this culture, the gospel is reduced to just one of many personally-held versions of truth.

Our society is now labeled post-Christian. Our current western culture has become increasingly secularized, simply meaning that religion has less and less significance and influence. Religious diversity is rising, atheism is growing, moral relativism is the Kool-Aid of the day, and Christianity may be tolerated as long as it's held privately. There is a growing attitude of irrelevance and even antagonism towards Christianity in certain segments of our culture. In a society that gives lip service to the idea of 'tolerance', Christians who hold exclusive truth claims may be intolerable. Christianity is no longer blindly accepted or even assumed respectable.

There are lots of complicated reasons for this shift that has taken place over the last number of decades. Secular education, multiculturalism, the sexual revolution, church leader moral scandals, consumer capitalism, celebrity culture, legal and constitutional changes, the breakdown of the nuclear family are a few. Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias also suggests that television has had a significant shaping influence in the deconstruction of Christian thought in the west because of its incredible ability to define the world through the power of our imaginations. He says, "I believe that [television] was a key means by which the truth came to be seen as a lie." However it has happened, the reality is that today we live in a culture whose loudest voices often slander the validity and value of the Christian faith.

And like the discouraged Jewish believers who heard their culture's messages and arguments so much that their faith began to weaken, we too can begin to doubt the validity and value of our faith when it is accused and dismissed as being unreasonable and irrelevant. The writer to the Hebrews challenged the believers there to hold onto the hope they had in Jesus. We need to as well. But how do we answer the doubt that rises in our own minds and especially in the minds of our children as

we try to answer the questions and accusations of culture around us? Is our God real? Is he really *the way, the truth, and the life*? Is this a truth that is compelling enough to live our lives by?

Let's read from Hebrews 10 again

*... Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.*

So in order to gain some encouragement to keep holding tightly to the hope we affirm, what we're going to do is go on a little jaunt through history to help us remember that Christianity has never been intellectually unreasonable or practically irrelevant, even though our culture suggests that it's both. Since we have 2000 years of church history that reveal Christianity's practical relevance and intellectual reasonability, I want to offer you a reminder of who we are as the people of God so that you can walk into 2020 with confidence and hope as a follower of the way of Jesus.

Now, I know I just said the word 'history' twice. For those of you who just groaned inwardly because you, like me, had a terrible grade 10 history teacher that droned on about things that you didn't know could be so boring, I know your pain. Let me tell you an embarrassing secret that up until recently, I have never been an appreciator of history. My school history teachers were just so boring and I could never understand how any of it could ever be useful. So I'm slightly embarrassed to admit that I've spent most of my life with the attitude of 'who cares what happened before, the only thing that matters is how I live my life today.'

Well, the good news is that my perspective is changing. I've recently come to discover something amazing: In every century from the time of Jesus onwards, there have been individuals and groups of exceptionally smart, discerning, creative, resourceful, passionate men and women who simply lived their life with a recognition of the presence and providence of the living Jesus Christ. To these Jesus followers, the gospel was not intellectually

unreasonable or practically irrelevant. In fact, it was so practical that many of them ended up changing the world around them in massively significant ways.

When we forget history, we assume that the good things we take for granted in society today like basic human rights, education, and medicine just kind of evolved on their own for the better over time. But that's not how it happened. These things were gifted to us by people in the past, many of them who were followers of Jesus Christ.

Followers of Jesus that have come before us lived with the conviction that God redeems and restores the world through Jesus because he loves the world, and so they loved the world too. They didn't think they had to separate their intellect or their giftedness from their faith in Jesus. In fact, they partnered with God to see his world restored--in all its goodness, its order, and its beauty. And they sought to know and love God more through understanding the complex world that he made.

Remember that Russel Crowe movie, the Gladiator? For 1000 years, watching people brutally kill each other was the most popular entertainment in the Roman world. The colosseum held more than 50,000 people. If you remember the movie, the gladiators were slaves, criminals, or condemned prisoners of war that fought in the arena to the death for the bloody entertainment of the masses.

This went on until *Christianity* began to grow and gain a foothold in the Roman world. Because the church was growing and followers of Jesus were committed to a Biblical understanding of the intrinsic value of human life that all people were made in God's image and didn't deserve death for the sake of entertainment, these contests began to lose their appeal. In the year 404, an outraged monk named Telemachus jumped into the arena and ran between two fighting gladiators to stop them. The crowd was not happy with Telemachus for ruining their entertainment that day and they stoned him to death, but ultimately the emperor put an official end to gladiatorial contests as a result of what happened. Telemachus was a Jesus follower who simply valued people like Jesus did and literally stood up for them when no one else would. His commitment to faith in Christ made a very practical contribution to people in his society.

Did you know that leaving unwanted newborn babies outside to die used to be socially acceptable? Can you imagine if you stepped outside your front door tomorrow morning to head to work or get on the bus for school or get to your dentist appointment and you found a brand new baby lying on the ground beside your neighbour's garbage can? Well, this was par for the course for a lot of societies before Jesus followers turned the tide. Not only were unwanted infants left out in the elements to die of exposure, they were also offered as live sacrifices in pagan rituals. As Christianity spread through the roman world and the church began to grow and have more influence, it was Jesus followers who began rescuing and caring for the infants who had been left to die of exposure. By the middle ages, churches, monasteries, and abbeys came to be known as places that would care for unwanted children. Eventually, infanticide was outlawed. Jesus followers living in this time and place simply lived out their conviction that all people are made in God's image which gives them intrinsic value. It was their understanding of God's love and their commitment to his way that altered the course of human rights for children that we simply take for granted today.

One wonderful aspect of our current western culture, which I'm especially grateful for, is that we recognize the intrinsic value and worth of women, but do not assume that this has always been the case or that it just so happened. Christianity was instrumental in raising the status of women in society. Jesus' own dignified and honouring treatment of women was opposite to the notions of the day that women were evil, subordinate, and man's property. He set a new standard for the treatment of women. Because of those who followed after Jesus, women began to be granted control of property, were allowed to be legal guardians of their children, and were protected from being married off as child brides. In more recent history, the influence of Jesus followers in rural China helped to stop the practice of binding women's feet to the point of permanently crippling them and in India the practice of burning widows alive when their husbands die. One author says it this way: "In today's world, wherever Christianity has flourished, men and women are both recognized as valued members of society; wherever Christianity has been largely rejected, women have

few rights and can be treated as something less than a full person."

We also have followers of Jesus Christ to thank for much of our educational system today. And education is important!

From as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century, monasteries and then cathedral schools became the primary centers of education. Many of Europe's universities were founded by the church as a continuation of this educational system. Did you know that the University of Paris was founded in 1150 and Oxford University slightly earlier—both schools founded by Jesus followers—1000 years ago! Harvard and Yale were also both established by the Christian church around 1700 in order to educate ministers to keep sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Harvard's motto is VERITAS, which is Latin for truth, and Yale's motto is LUX and VERITAS—light and truth. Laval University is the oldest university in Canada, initially established as a Christian seminary with a motto that says "By the grace of God, to no one equal". Even our own Western University was founded by a bishop of the Anglican Church. It's first four faculties were Arts, Law, Medicine, and Divinity (the study of Christian theology). Christianity has never been intellectually unreasonable, in fact, it laid much of the groundwork for the training of intellectuals. Sadly, these institutions who have Jesus followers to thank for their incredible history are now going out of their way to expel any makings of Christianity from their thought, teaching, or culture.

Followers of the way of Jesus Christ have also had a significant shaping influence on medicine. Talk about practically relevant! Following Jesus' example of care for the sick and broken, the Christian church in the second century took in sufferers of the plague who had been thrown out of their own household. While pagan religions seldom offered help to the sick, it was the early Christians who were the ones that cared for sick slaves, prisoners, the elderly, and lepers. Hospitals and hospices were built by Jesus followers for the sick and the dying. Monks trained physicians and the practice of nursing was connected to the church for centuries.

Healthcare is such a massive government-controlled industry that is now an assumed right for everyone

in Canada but please remember that Jesus followers have been driving and leading healthcare for centuries. These Christians used whatever ability and compassion God had given them coupled with the faith they had in the love of God for his world to influence the history of health care as we know it today.

Another amazing area of Jesus followers in history is in the realm of art and music. Followers of Jesus Christ expressed their faith by using the gifts God gave them and they have produced some of the world's most celebrated works of visual and musical art—Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven. They didn't think that their faith in Jesus Christ was intellectually unreasonable or practically irrelevant or destructive to society. Their faith actually led them to cultivate and express their talents so they could restore goodness, order, and beauty to God's world and so they could articulate God's forgiveness and reconciliation and redemption in the languages and emotion of the heart.

Did you know that Michelangelo, who is considered by many to be the greatest artist of all time, believed that he was reflecting and imitating God best when he was using his chisel and brush? Did you know that Leonardo DaVinci, who is widely considered one of the greatest painters of all time, believed that creating art was like making a prayer book for people since images can evoke thoughts that draw our hearts and minds towards the Lord? Did you know that the musician Handel composed his famous '*Handel's Messiah*' in order to raise money to release 142 men from debtor's prison? These gifted individuals were Jesus followers who reflected and expressed God's love and redemption and served him with purpose in the fullest way they could.

Well, how about science? Surely this is where we stop right? No way (I like science way more than history, by the way!). The widespread notion especially in schools that science and Christianity are mutually exclusive and at odds with one another is absolute fallacy. This is where many would suggest that Christianity is intellectually unreasonable.

But science illustrates over and over again the presence of an exceptionally amazing creator. The

detail and precision with which every organism and system in our universe exists is a testimony to the creative genius of an extraordinary and supreme creator. Some of our most famous scientists over the centuries have been individuals with a firm faith in God--a faith that they understood was neither intellectually unreasonable nor practically irrelevant.

Video blogger Hank Green in his Crash course video on science says: "I'm obsessed with how people throughout the ages have uncovered truths about the universe and converted these into a wealth of technological wonders... I'm not going to tell you that *only* followers of Jesus have contributed to science in significant ways through history, because that would be untrue. But I will tell you that followers of Jesus who were gifted up here (brain) were convinced that their faith in God and in the inner workings of our complex world were not ideas that were in conflict with one another."

Galileo who was a major contributor to astronomy, physics, and the scientific method understood that the Bible and nature did not disagree: one was God's word to the masses; a story about how to behave and why. The other was God's work--the physical reality that he created....Galileo said that science was simply the uncovering of God's work and he uncovered in order to better know the God that he loved and served.

Isaac Newton, a scientist of the highest order who was revered in his own lifetime and ours for discoveries in optics, calculus, and physics, actually spent more time on theology than on science. He wrote about 1.3 million words on biblical subjects, which would take about 110 hours to read. He wrote 10 times as much on theology as he ever did on math and science. This intellectual had no qualms about marrying the reasonability of hard science with trust in God.

Louis Pasteur, from whom we have been granted the benefits of pasteurization... is known as the father of microbiology. He studied bacteria, developed some of the first vaccines, and contributed to the germ theory of disease which revolutionized clinical medicine. His son-in-law said of him that he had absolute faith in God and a conviction that the power for good given to us in this world will be continued beyond it.

The great wide world of science may now try to claim that faith in God is intellectually unreasonable and practically irrelevant, but we will do well to remember that many of the most intellectual scientific thinkers were followers of Jesus Christ and that it's more than just reasonable for you follow Jesus in this arena as well.

John D. Rockefeller was a Jesus-following American businessman and widely considered the wealthiest American of all time and the richest person in modern history. Along with providing meaningful work for people and steady income for many families, with his fortune, Rockefeller also shaped modern philanthropy by creating foundations that had a major effect on medicine, education, and scientific research. He said, "I believe the power to make money is a gift from God just as are the instincts for art, music, literature, the doctor's talent, the nurse's, yours: to be developed and used to the best of our ability for the good of mankind."

Human rights, art, music, education, medicine, science, business and industry, these things that are so foundational to the well-ordered society that we take for granted find significant roots with Jesus followers. You don't have to turn off your brain to be a Christian, in fact, I plead with you not to! Smart, reasonable men and women followed Christ and changed their world in every century and continue to do so. I'm not going to suggest that Christians always got it right every time, but the worldwide church that follows the way of Jesus has made incredible contributions to our society.

Following the way of Jesus has never been unreasonable or irrelevant in any point in history and just because mass media pretends otherwise, it's not going to start now.

Speaking of now, did you know that the worldwide church continues to grow? The Washington Post tells us that a full third of our world's current population identify as Christians and although Christianity may be on the decline in North America and Europe, it is growing rapidly in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. And it's not just that people stand and wave the flag of Christianity, it's that the good news of Jesus Christ is continuing its work of reconciliation and transformation.

I've been reading an interesting book about international development and came across a great story. A Christian poverty alleviation organization recently stepped into an Asian country to train a number of very poor churches to transform their communities by simply depending on God to help them steward their own gifts, resources, and creativity--rather than just receiving handouts. Amazingly, over 7 years, these 500 communities moved out of poverty with no assistance from foreigners! The government took notice of this and decided to conduct a study to find out how this happened. They sent a team of non-Christian PhD students to assess some of the communities. This is what the students concluded: "the reason these villages moved out of poverty was that the church members had understood their Bibles and had started to apply the Bible's teaching to their lives." The government was disappointed in this conclusion, so they sent another team of PhD students to assess some of the communities. This is what the second group of students found: "The real reason that the communities moved out of poverty was the Christian God. As the people in the villages had followed God and sought to walk in obedience to Him, He had lifted them out of poverty."

The gospel of Jesus Christ is living and powerful and continues to be transformative. I'm not saying that it's a magic ticket out of trouble--because scripture tells us that we will, in fact have trouble here on earth and sometimes a lot of it--but we have the presence of the living Christ alongside us who we believe brings joy, love, peace, and hope, even in the middle of the difficulties--all those beautiful things that we've been singing about over Christmas.

All of these little history stories are hopefully reminding you that being a Christian is a choice that is far from intellectually unreasonable or practically irrelevant. But, I would be remiss if I simply pointed out all the wonderful things that well-meaning Jesus followers have done *for* the world simply as a testimony of human innovation and moral courage, as if it's somehow all about our efforts.

Because maybe you think to yourself, I could never change the world like that. And maybe you never will change the world like Isaac Newton or

Michelangelo. I certainly won't! Our celebrity culture tricks us into thinking that we only have real worth if we are famous or remarkable or make some "significant" contribution, but that's just not true.

Think of Mother Theresa. She didn't do anything particularly amazing. What she practiced was simple and quiet obedience and service. She only became recognized because of a lifetime of very small but faithful actions.

Our contribution is always best when it is simple submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and faithful obedience to him in whatever area of influence we have--whether it's large or small. We have to remember that we are not lone ranger Christians. *Together*, we are the body of Christ in the world that God loves and it's the cumulative effect of our small collective contributions that influence the world.

When we are able to simply submit our abilities and passions and opportunities to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we are able to let God take the praise. Because the remarkable thing about the history of Christianity in the modern world is not that thousands of individuals worked up enough inner strength within themselves to alter the course of history.

You see, these are God's fingerprints on our world, not ours. This is God's body that has imprinted itself on the pages of history telling his story of redemption and restoration. Jesus told us that he was going to empower his church with the Holy Spirit in order to be his hands and feet, his preservative salt and illuminating light all over his beloved world. He is the one who calls us and transforms us into a body that is good for his creation. And looking at history today, we can see that he has done that! And we believe that he continues to do that today and that he will continue to do that tomorrow in our broken world until he eventually consummates his glorious eternal kingdom.

I was reminded on Tuesday night during the Christmas Eve service of the series we've just finished on Isaiah 9:6 "And He Shall Be Called". Remember who our savior is? Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. But listen to the verse that follows

right after this: "His government and its peace will never end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." So we're not surprised that God's kingdom of peace and love continues to be established and upheld. He already promised it! And he promises that it will never end!

But, even though the fingerprints of God in the pages of history remind us that the way of Jesus is so good for the world, the loudest voices in our culture DO tell us that Christianity is unreasonable and irrelevant, outdated, even destructive. And if we let these messages bombard us without tempering them with truth, we *will* eventually start to believe them.

Media is so LOUD and we take in so much of it. We watch TV, we go to movies, we hear the news, we listen to the iTunes or the radio, we read billboards, we catch our Instagram, Face book, and twitter feeds, we listen to podcasts, watch TED talks, and scroll through YouTube. We are absorbing into our minds a huge volume of messages that are very often contrary to the transformative truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If we let mainstream media's versions of truth speak louder to us than the truth of the gospel, we will inevitably begin to let culture interpret our faith rather than allowing our faith to be the lens through which we interpret our culture. We need to be aware of what's going on and get involved in it. But we must let our faith interpret the messages of culture and not the other way around. How can we possibly be able to hold onto the hope we have in Jesus Christ unless we are balancing the messages we consume in mainstream media with what we believe to be true as followers of Jesus Christ?

Alright, it's time for my new year's resolution challenge.

Remember the verse we started with?

*"Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but*

encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near."

CS Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* says this: "One must train the habit of faith...Daily prayers and religious readings and churchgoing are necessary parts of the Christian life. We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in the mind. It must be fed."

So maybe you can guess my New Year's resolution challenge. It's simply this: If you've found encouragement to hold onto the hope you have in Jesus through hearing the stories of the fingerprints of God in our history, in 2020, would you make it a priority to keep meeting with other followers of Jesus? Like Lewis says, our belief will not stay alive unless it is fed.

By meeting, I don't just mean creating an insulated bubble of Christians around us to hang out with. I mean the intentional meeting of believers that draws us towards the heart of God and the truth of God through the essential practices of our faith - prayer, scripture, worship, meditation, and communion.

Consistently gathering helps to keep us grounded in our identity as adopted sons and daughters of a loving heavenly father and gives us a space where we can encourage one another to continue following the Lord. It allows us to balance the messages we receive in culture with the transformative presence of the living Christ and the truth of his gospel.

I know that you have many demands on your attention and your time. So, I commend you all that in light of these demands, you've chosen to be here. For some of you, it may not have been an easy choice.

As we turn the page to a new year, would you make 2020 a year that you prioritize gathering with other Jesus followers to keep feeding your faith? Maybe that means dropping a hockey practice or volleyball tournament so that you can make it out to weekend services more frequently, or maybe it means joining a small group or weekly Bible study, or initiating a prayer group or triad, youth group or young adults or young professionals. Take up the challenge to set aside precious time that could be seemingly more productive, or more fun, or more restful elsewhere

and give it to God as you meet with believers to be encouraged and transformed and equipped to recognize God's fingerprints in our world and join him in his redemptive work.

I hope that I've encouraged you that despite culture's messages, we know that following Jesus is an invaluable privilege and a gift from God that has been and continues to be so very good – for the world. For the sake of time I've only told a very few stories and there are so many others. God's fingerprints of restoration are evident everywhere and he continues to bring salvation and redemption through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Following Jesus is not intellectually unreasonable. It's not practically irrelevant. Hold onto the hope that you have in Jesus Christ and feed that faith because it's a wonderfully life-giving choice in a world full of choices and you can be part of his amazing story.