



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Sense Making By Faith

SCRIPTURE:  
Hebrews 11:1-8,  
29-12-2

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October 30, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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**R**einhold Niebuhr said, “Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.” Niebuhr knows that following Jesus requires, in one way or another, that we give ourselves away and that won’t always make sense by the common calculus of this world. Faith is required.

Tuesday is Nov. 1. In the church calendar, that’s All Saints’ Day. It’s a day to remember those who have taught us. Those who have inspired us. Those who have loved us into faith. The writer of Hebrews recognized the importance of remembering the saints.

We don’t know who wrote Hebrews. We don’t know the first readers of Hebrews. We do know it is less a letter and more a sermon.<sup>1</sup> The writer of Hebrews was a preacher. And the preacher preaches to a weary congregation. As New Testament scholar Tom Long says, “They are tired... Tired of serving the world. Tired of worship. Tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society; tired of the spiritual struggle... tired even of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

For this weary congregation, the preacher takes an unusual tactic. He says: Stand tall in your faith. Double down on faith. And faith, this preacher says, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Even as he says it, the preacher knows that assurance and conviction are fragile among his readers. They are less ‘we believe’ and more ‘help our unbelief.’

So, he reminds them of the saints. By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a land that I will show you: he went. And by faith, Joseph dreamed of the exodus. And by faith, the parents of Moses placed him in the bulrushes. By faith, the people passed through

the sea. By faith, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. And as if there is more story to tell than the preacher has breath to speak, he says: I do not have time to tell you about everyone. For I could also tell you of Gideon and Samson and David and Samuel and the prophets.

His point is clear. If you are facing difficulties, so did they. If they made sense of their lives by faith, so can you. We are not alone. We are standing on the shoulders of giants.

Sometimes our assurance and conviction get battered as we hear of yet another shooting. As the consequences of climate change mount. As we hear of yet another lie in and about public life. As we hear of Russian brutality and resurrected nuclear threats.

It’s not just these. It’s the relationships we just can’t find a way to heal. The injuries and fears we can’t find a way to lay down.

When the problems seem big and pervasive, it can leave us feeling small. Like nothing we do matters. Like tomorrow is not a new day, just yesterday lived all over again. It can make you weary. Do you ever get weary like that?

I imagine the Hebrew preacher would grab us by the lapels and tell us to stand tall. She would remind us of our story.

She might remind us that as the realities of Great War were waning, a young guy with sensible shoes and plenty of Vitalis walked these neighborhoods inviting people to be part of a new community that would care for one another and serve the world. To be part of a community that would tell the truth and practice kindness and extend welcome to all. And neighbors responded to Dr. Bob and Village Church was born.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Tom Long, *Hebrews: Interpretation Commentary* (1997) p. 2.

2 Long, p. 3

3 This is an impossible sermon. I have endeavored to mention some saints in the Village congregation. But this

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And in less dramatic fashion, she might tell you about Fred. Fred grew up Catholic in coal-mining country, but a job would bring Fred to Kansas City where he would find Village Church. On Wednesday nights, you could find Fred clearing the dishes. On Thursdays, you would find him with Stephen Ministry. And every Sunday, he would usher. One Christmas Eve the snow fell. It kept many worshipers away and it kept many ushers away, too, so Fred just stayed all night. After the last service, while driving home, his car slid into a ditch. It was 1 a.m. Christmas morning and three cars had passed him by. Standing in the snow, he prayed, "God, I just ushered four services. Can you get someone to stop?" Before he finished praying, a car pulled up and drove him home. By faith, in quiet, humble service, Fred Farkas was one among many who have ensured all are welcomed here.<sup>4</sup>

The preacher might remind us of Jennifer Kieltyka. For 25 years she taught two-year-olds. The first lesson of faith is love. And Ms. Kieltyka made sure every two-year-old at Village Church was loved.

And the preacher might remind us of Elene Hoffman. For more than 30 years here at Village she taught second and third graders how Abraham followed the call of God, how David was king, how Jonah preached in Nineveh, and when the world put Jesus in the ground, God raised him back up.

By faith, Jennifer taught our children to sing, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." And by faith, Elene taught the children that their names were written in the stories of scripture.

The preacher would remind us of the first Sunday in February of 1960. In those days, most folks went to church every Sunday, so this room was packed. But that February Sunday, something astonishing happened: The scripture at each service was read by a woman. That had never happened before at Village Church. There was a woman reading scripture all by herself. Turns out, women are pretty good leading worship.

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congregation knows the list of those who should be mentioned could never be addressed in any single service. In many cases, those named are illustrative of others who do the same work and serve in the same spirit. It is my hope that by identifying a few among us, we recognize the faithfulness of God in the many. As Hebrews says, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

<sup>4</sup> There are many, like Fred, who have served as ushers for decades. They are a constant voice of welcome and joy at Village.

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Well, now the camel's nose is in the tent, as they say. In December of 1963, the nominating committee presented their slate of officers and among the elders elected was one Phyllis Matchette. Phyllis was the first woman elected as an elder at Village. The elder who chaired the worship committee suggested that the best way for Phyllis to participate in communion would be to come on Saturday and get everything ready for the other elders to serve. That way she wouldn't have to lift those heavy trays during worship. There was an elder named Bill Degan; I loved Bill Degan. He said, "Absolutely not. She was elected an elder same as us. If we are serving communion in this Sanctuary, she will serve right along with us." She did. We are standing on the shoulders of giants.

The preacher might remind us of Joe and Grace Zimmerman who came to church and heard that people displaced by Hurricane Katrina were coming to Village and they needed places to stay. So, they walked to Friendship Hall and there, joined by about 100 others, offered their spare room to anyone who needed it.

The Hebrew preacher talked about those who have gone before. But I have more stories to tell. It's not just those who have gone before; there are giants among us now.

So, the preacher might remind us of that day when Betty Crooker met Mrs. Ruthie. I wish I was there that afternoon. Betty drove her nice car into the Ivanhoe neighborhood. She saw Mrs. Ruthie sitting on her front porch. Betty parked her car and with her "Sunday-go-to-church" clothes, with shoes and purse all matching, she walked up on that porch and said, "Hi there, I'm Betty." "Morning Betty, I'm Mrs. Ruthie." "Nice to meet you. Mrs. Ruthie, how long have you been in this neighborhood?" Mrs. Ruthie said, "I was getting ready to ask you the same question." In that moment, Front Porch Alliance was born. And the relationship has changed Ivanhoe a bit and has changed Village a lot.

By faith, Kelly Thomason, with tears in her eyes

and a mixture of weariness and hope in her soul that comes from a long battle, said, “We know the church we have been can’t survive. So, we ask for your help because we are fighting for a church where people will be treated with kindness, justice will be pursued, and where our children, regardless of who they love, will be welcome.” And by faith, Kelly and a host of others, stood tall and Village on Antioch was born.

Niebuhr says: So much of what we do really doesn’t make sense in the context of history. Because to follow Jesus is in one way or another to give yourself away. And to the calculus of the world, that makes no sense. But by faith, and the faith we have seen in others, it is the only thing that makes sense.

That’s why every Tuesday women gather in the basement of our Mission campus, and with joy and laughter and a tireless energy, Mission Sewing produces thousands of articles of clothing to be shared with those who need it most. Started by Helen Taliaferro and scores of others, by faith they sew.

And that’s why Thursday evenings, Jim Bolton and dozens of others gather with a joyful spirit and a quiet commitment to hone their skills in Stephen Ministry and then spread out over this community offering a listening ear, a word of encouragement and a prayer for a better day. We are standing on the shoulders of giants.

And do you remember Ellen Gatewood and Fred Logan and Ted Higgins and Melanie Mann and Bev Chapman and Ginny Beal who have joined hundreds of others to engage in not only life-changing—but at times, life-saving—acts of mission at the Mexico border and in the D.R. and in Haiti and in Kenya? We are standing on the shoulders of giants.

And by faith, Amy Nunnelee after years of teaching confirmation, after years of taking youth ski trips and mission trips—even after her own kids have gone off to college—she still shows up on Sunday nights to volunteer with high-school students. And our students have learned to trust her kindness and care. Like the Hebrew preacher, there is more story to tell than I have breath to speak... I must tell of ...

Charlotte Davison who lives each day striving for gun safety. And Pam Logan and Mary Lehoczky who have helped our Session renew a faithful conversation about race. And high schooler Christian Scamahorn-Vaz, who serves on an APNC to call a pastor for Antioch knowing that soon after that pastor comes, Christian will go off to college and then probably after that, go run the world.

And by faith, Sherry and Dane Manis join others to make telecare calls to folks who need a friendly voice and a word of love. And by faith, Marvie Sneegas organizes Share a Song ministry for our visits to the retirement communities. And by faith, Dave Lillard and hundreds of others stock the shelves of the Food Pantry because in God’s promised day hunger will be no more.

What more should I say, for time would fail me to tell of them all. I could preach until Jesus returns and I would still be talking about you.

So, I need your help today. I have mentioned a few, but you know many more who need to be remembered in the presence of God today. Will you remember them today? Give thanks for the saints in our church and the saints in your life. And when your assurance of things hoped for and our conviction of things not seen is fragile, remember these. And your faith will be renewed. How could it not?

But not only that. Also remember there are children of God coming. So your name is written in this story, too. For in big and small ways, you choose grace, and you choose generosity, and you choose kindness, and you choose honesty, and you choose to look for the good in those around you. You choose to do the good that is yours to do.

And you may feel small in doing so, given the state of the world these days. But do not lose heart. For the day will come when there will be others who are weary and struggling to make sense of their lives and someone will look back and lift up your name to remind those who are weary. Don’t lose heart. You are not alone, for you are standing on the shoulders of giants.