

## I believe that I cannot believe (Isaiah 50:10)

A sermon for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

We begin today with a couple of Bible puns. Perhaps you've heard of the church that has a nursery and on the door of the nursery is a Bible verse, 1 Cor 15:51: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed."

You may have also heard of the pastor who really disliked the man-bun, the knot of hair some fellows now wear on the tops of their heads. The pastor wanted to preach against the man-bun, so he chose as his text Luke 17:31: On the Day of the Lord: "Let him who is on the housetop . . . **not** come down." Top knot come down!

Both these jokes or puns are obviously the wrong way to use the Bible. We laugh at them and we also know that there are bigger, serious ways of misusing the Bible. For example: What does Paul mean when he uses the word, "conscience"? Today we think of Jiminy Cricket's advice to Pinocchio: "Always let your conscience be your guide." Yet that's not what Paul meant, nor Luther, either, when he said: "Here I stand I can do no other."

That brings us to our problem for today: What is the meaning of believing? What does it mean to have faith? It involves the question of what is really real? My feelings? Are they what's really real? What about the many varieties of modern psychology? What about scientism: The belief that what is really real is limited to what can be proven by the scientific method.

Some examples. First, Genesis 15:6 states: "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." In Genesis 12:1-3 faith is tied to the covenant, and the covenant has three parts: 1) They will be given a land; 2) they will be a great people, and 3) they will be a blessing. That's what happened for about 800 years, through kings David and Solomon. But then the people fell into idolatry and disaster. They lost the land. They broke into twelve tribes, and ten of the twelve were lost. The people were scattered and deported. And they have fallen for centuries into idolatry, and that's not a blessing.

Second, how does God work? In Isaiah 10:5, it says: "Ah, Assyria, the rod of **my** anger." This is how God works. And in Isaiah 45:1, Cyrus, the ruler of the greatest empire of that time, is called the Lord's "**anointed,**" and the anointed one is the Messiah! Cyrus probably didn't even know who the Palestinians were, he had such a big empire. Later in Jeremiah 43:10 the wicked King Nebuchadrezzar is called "**my** servant," by the Lord. Where is he working? Outside of us, in spite of us.

What then about "faith"? What is it? Romans 1:17, quoting Habakuk 2:4 states: "The righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written (here Paul is quoting

Habakkuk 2:4): "He who through faith is righteous shall live." But if you flip back in your Bible to that verse in Habakkuk, you find a note that states that "faith" means "faithfulness" and thus the original Hebrew means: "Man shall live by his own faithfulness."

All of this raises a problem about words and their usage. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is huge. The last printed edition (1989) contained over 21,000 pages in twenty volumes. It features entries which include the earliest recorded use of the word (obsolete or current) and each additional sense of the word in historic order. Today the OED is only available electronically. One of the fascinating things about this great dictionary is that you learn that **dictionaries are history books**, just as grammar books are history books.

The point is that when you come to the word "faith," the OED points out that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries faith was used as a verb. How could they do that? It was ordinary for them. Words mean what they are **used** to mean and not somehow determined by some eternal grammar or eternal dictionary.

That is critical for us and is shown by the difference between Habakkuk 2:4: "The just shall live by his faithfulness," and Habakkuk 3:17-18 which talks about faith and how one trusts in the Lord in the face of a total wipeout of the crops:

"Though the fig tree do not blossom,  
nor or fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold,  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will joy in the God of my salvation."

In Isaiah 50:10 we find the question: "Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant?" And the answer is: He "who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the Lord." The one who is blind. Isaiah and Habakkuk are the same.

Third, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew (28:16-17) it states: "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him; **but some doubted.**" He had appeared to many over the forty days after the resurrection. See 1 Cor 15:5-10 and also Acts 10:41: "God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses."

Where and how God is working? Of course this is not an intellectual question; it's a question of salvation. How do we know where and how God is working?

One of the traditional ways God is said to be working is through Christians coming together and acting in unison in churchwide councils. Starting with the one in Acts, extending up through the First Vatican Council, such councils were always unanimous, because, as it says in Acts 15:28: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us." That was the understanding that then they knew what the Holy Spirit had decided.

But as Luther (and others) famously said: Councils, too, can err, and they have.

What about congregations? Some say we ought to be able to depend on the congregations, on lay people who aren't confused by all the intellectual stuff. They are sane Christians. That may be true among us, but there are a lot of crazy things that happen in many congregations. As C.S. Lewis pointed out: The Devil works harder in the church because he owns all the rest.

What about through confessions of faith? Some say: If you just confess correctly, then you are saved. But how do you know if you've done it right?

In Mark 8 Jesus asks his disciples: Who do you say I am? Peter answers (Mark 8:29): "You are the Christ!" But then a few verses later (Mark 8:33) when Peter rebuked Jesus for teaching them that he must suffer and die, Jesus rebukes Peter, saying: "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter didn't get it.

As Luther rediscovered: If it depends on me in any way, I can never be sure I'm sincere enough. I maybe think I'm sincere; was I **truly**? Am I **always**? Or did I believe correctly? We are all heretics. But in fact it doesn't depend on whether I am sincere enough, or like Peter, who didn't get it and denied Jesus three times.

Or is believing a matter of me actively receiving the grace of God? Romans 3:24 states: "They are justified by his grace as a gift." But does this mean that our job is to receive it actively? God does his part; we do ours? No The image of grace as a gift can go wrong and when that happens, grace is no longer grace, and we've lost the big picture.

The big picture is framed by sin and holiness. We are 100% sinners; we know this because we die. Sin and death are the same thing. And death is total. We continually forget that and miss that point.

And we are totally saved because of the cross. As it says in John 19:30: "It is finished." He did it by himself, without our help, and "it is finished."

Therefore we are those who have been claimed, chosen, adopted:

- Gal 4:9: "Now that you have come to know God, or rather **be known by him.**"

- Phil 3:12: “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because **Christ Jesus has made me his own.**”
- John 15:5: “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for **apart from me you can do nothing.**”
- John 1:13: “who were **born**, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but **of God.**”

If someone asks us: What does it mean “to believe”?, we point to **infant baptism**. That little one may be six weeks old and doesn’t make a decision, doesn’t know any correct doctrine, doesn’t feel anything, and doesn’t even do anything. The child is, as Luther said, “merely passive.” As Luther writes in the Large Catechism: In baptism the Lord snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us his own (Large Catechism 4:83). He does it.

And in the Small Catechism: “I believe that I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth . . . .” (The Creed, Third Article, 6).

Therefore we thank the Lord because he has done it all. And that’s why it’s sure. That’s why it is certain and a great comfort. It doesn’t depend on me and what I am, but what he does now and forever. Amen