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## Fulcrum of Faithfulness (Assured and Provoked)

Hebrews 10:11-25

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 14, 2021 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

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The signs are all around. The beautiful death of leaves on trees are just the most glorious markers of the ends that surround us. We are nearing the end of the academic semester, the end of the church year, and the end of 2021. And just as the leaves give up their green and the trees release their leaves in surrender to the needed rest of winter, so we easily find ourselves tired, exhausted, even weary as we come to the end of the year. In this season, it's no surprise if you find yourself needing rest and renewal. I wonder, are you weary?

There are varieties to the weariness that comes in our lives, especially that comes as we near the end of a semester or a liturgical or calendar year. Some of us no doubt feel the exhaustion of too many late nights completing problem sets, cramming for Orgo, or squeezing out the final words of papers due by 11:59 p.m. Some feel the weight of a year of unexpected health challenges, unforeseen financial failures, or the conclusion of relationships meant to last forever. And at the end of this year in particular, some are feeling weary from the weight of a full year with life disrupted by an ongoing global health crisis in spite of vaccines and treatments that seemed to offer so much hope. And these are just a few of the things that have weighed so heavily on our individual and collective hearts and minds this year. I haven't even mentioned the personal weariness that comes from long seasons of struggling to overcome destructive patterns or habits, of longing to believe that you are God's beloved but feeling like you don't measure up, of desiring to trust more deeply in Jesus but failing to live out that trust. Nor have I mentioned the communal weariness that comes when we experience those things that reveal our world is not as God desires it to be. The trials for the killings in Kenosha and the murder of Ahmaud Arbery are just two of the limitless examples that fill news headlines. With individual and collective weights like these on us, it's no wonder that so many come to the end of this year at least a little weary and tired, perhaps ready to surrender to a needed season of winter rest. Are you weary this morning?

The congregation who received the sermon of Hebrews was weary as well. Though the burdens that weighed on them differed from our own, they were nevertheless experiencing a sense of exhaustion. The church faced the fatigue that arises from unmet expectations related to Christ's return and final victory. They were burdened by the constant challenges and persecutions they faced for following Jesus. This church was dealing with the issues of being second generation in a world that did not favor them and wasn't better than what the first-generation Christians experienced. Some of the Christians were so discouraged by their reality that they were leaving the community and the faith behind—or as our text today says, they were “neglecting to meet together.” This wearied and worn-down congregation needed a word from the Lord, a message of encouragement to persevere, a sermon on the salutary work of their Savior. The book of Hebrews is just such a sermon.

Throughout the extended sermon of Hebrews, the preacher directs the tired and weary people again and again to Jesus. Like a good preacher of the gospel, he turns the people's attention to God's faithfulness through the work Jesus has finished on their behalf, once and for all. The preacher contrasts Jesus's work as the high priest over heaven and earth with the work of earthly priests. Earthly priests must stand again and again because the work of atonement, of forgiveness, of making right the people's relationship with God is not finally completed with their sacrifices. By

contrast Jesus is seated because through the sacrifice of his life and death, the work of restored relationship with God is complete. Jesus does not stand at the right hand of God the Father. No. He sits because the work is done. Or as the preacher proclaimed to the congregation of Hebrews, “When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God,’ and since then he has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet’” (12-13).

According to the preacher of Hebrews, the offering Jesus made, the offering of his own blood for the sake of the forgiveness of the sins of humanity, was enough. Jesus’s offering opened the way to a new relationship where the law of God’s love is internalized, written on the very hearts and minds of people, just as the Prophet Jeremiah proclaimed (Jeremiah 31:33-34). God has been faithful to God’s promise of a new reality of relationship. The work to bring that reality into existence is complete. For the preacher of Hebrews, this is the good news needed to buoy the spirits of the fatigued faithful facing trials, hardships, and struggles of all kinds.

The sermon doesn’t stop there. Like many good preachers, the preacher of Hebrews turns to the implications of this good news for the lives of those who are listening. He encourages the congregation to have confidence and to be assured in approaching God. Because of Jesus, nothing stands in the way of their connection with God. Through Jesus, the preacher says, the people are invited into the most holy, most intimate, most secure joining with God. They have been washed with the waters of baptism and marked by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. And because of this, the preacher encourages the congregation to embrace the assurance that comes with faith. But the implications for these Christians don’t stop there. He also challenges the people to provoke one another to love and good deeds. Assurance and provocation. Assured and provoked. The implications of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection for those who follow him lie between the assurance of faith on the one hand and being provoked to love and good deeds on the other. Faith and good works are the two hands of the Christian life, the two sides of the balance of discipleship.

“Good sermon, Preacher!” we may say to the Preacher of Hebrews. “But what does your message about living in light of Christ’s completed work say to people who are weary and worn out, fatigued and in need of encouragement? People like the Hebrews’ congregation? People like us?” It’s surely good to know that Christ has completed the work needed to unite us with God, and the image of Christ sitting instead of standing because his work is complete is a powerful one. Yet as we strive to live in the truth of this reality, we, like the congregation of Hebrews, still find ourselves weary and overburdened with matters of life and faith. Thankfully, the preacher of Hebrews offers a gem for us in the middle of his practical application, right between being assured in faith and provoked to love. And with the help of a simple refresher of a science lesson this gem can assist us as we carry our loads and struggle in seasons of weariness in our life with God. In verse 23 the preacher says, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.” Why? Because “God who has promised is faithful.”

Let’s call this reminder of the centrality of God’s faithfulness “the fulcrum of God’s faithfulness.” You may remember from your basic physics class that the fulcrum is pivot point on which a lever rests or is supported. Take the example of the seesaw on the playground. It has a board sitting on a pivot point that allows it to rock back and forth. This playground lever system relies on the fulcrum. Without the fulcrum the seesaw would just be a board on the ground and no fun for anyone. And while I won’t go down the road of explaining mechanical advantage, I’ll leave that to the Pratt students, what you should know about a lever is that it can be quite useful in lifting

heavy loads, especially when the fulcrum is moved to the right place in the lever. The closer the fulcrum is to the load, the easier it is to lift. When those who follow Christ recognize God's faithfulness to be the fulcrum of our life—the thing on which everything pivots—the effort shifts. God's great faithfulness is steadfast and sure, and because of it, the most difficult seasons, the greatest burdens, even the heaviest loads become manageable no matter how weary we are because God's great faithfulness bears the load.

The preacher of Hebrews calls for assurance in faith and provoking to love. Yet, at times, our weariness can make either of these—faith or acts of love—seem like too heavy a load. Sometimes the heavy weight sits on the side of assurance in faith. Perhaps in this season, doing the work of good deeds doesn't feel as daunting as trusting in God's goodness or believing in your belovedness or having an assurance of what can't be seen. In seasons when faith feels like it's too much to bear, then it's time to allow the fulcrum of God's faithfulness to shift closer to the calling of faith. It's time to allow the effort of love and good deeds to help with the work of leveling your life with God. In the seasons where the calling to faith feels like more than you can bear, let God's faithfulness do the real work in boosting your faith. By recalling the stories of those who've walked the road of faith before us, like Hebrews 11 does, you can allow God's faithfulness to sit closer to the load of faith. Another way to move the fulcrum of God's faithfulness closer to the calling of faith is by singing or listening to the spirituals of the black church who persisted in faith in the face of oppression. They sang songs of faith knowing only God could bring about a new day of freedom. When you show up for worship, and the people around you speak the words of the creed or sing the hymns of faith for you because you can't do it on your own, the fulcrum of God's faithfulness moves closer to the weight of faith. Even when you are weary in faith, God's faithfulness remains.

At other times trusting in God or having an assurance of what can't be seen are not most weighty or wearisome. Instead, being provoked to love and good deeds simply feels like too much of a challenge to handle. In seasons when acts of love feel like too much to bear, then it's time to allow the fulcrum of God's faithfulness to shift closer to the calling to love. It's time to allow the assurance of faith, your trust in God, and the assurance of your belovedness help with the work of leveling your life with God. I wonder if as you've heard the calling of Christ to take up your cross and follow him, you don't think you have it in you to do the acts of love that come with taking up your cross. Perhaps you can't imagine forgiving those who've harmed you or sacrificing the precious treasures that belong to you or serving those who don't seem deserving of your time. Perhaps it's the prophetic calls to justice—which, as Cornell West reminds us, is what love looks like in public—that feel like more than you can do. I wonder if you're wearied and overburdened by the massive amounts of change that are needed in our world and the work required to effect those changes. If any of these are the case, you may need to move the fulcrum of God's faithfulness closer to the weight of the calling to love and good works. You can do this by remembering stories of God's faithfulness through the work of saints in scripture and in our communities. Seeing how God has shown up and good has come about in the actions of others can make the weight of the calling to love easier to move, even when we're weary and worn out. Witnessing acts of love expressed by our siblings in Christ moves the reminder of God's faithfulness closer when the heavy load is love. Even when you are weary in love, God's faithfulness remains.

No matter what in your life is making you weary, no matter what is weighing you down, God's faithfulness is steadfast and makes the way for the hope that persists amidst failing faith and futile works. Whatever the season, whatever feels like it's coming to an end, God's faithfulness remains. And ultimately, it's God's faithfulness in Jesus that "supplies the capability for action," that serves as the fulcrum point for balancing the life of faith and love, of assurance and provocation, of trusting in God and acting out works of love. In the end, the fulcrum of God's faithfulness makes the life of discipleship possible. Now that's some good news for the weary. Amen.