

9.15.2024 Sermon

Series Un-Wrap | Hebrews 11:1-3

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKER

Elder Kevin Brisbin

Well, good morning. Good morning, everyone. Yes, as he said, my name is Kevin Brisbin, and I have the privilege of serving as one of the elders here at the church. That is the extent of my official titles. I have not been to seminary. I don't have a doctorate, a master's, or even a bachelor's degree, but I do have the chance to share here with you what I've discovered and what I've heard God leading me in and following my curiosities through in this text we have this morning. I have my human experience, and I bring all of myself to all of these sermons. I do consider it a great privilege and a great responsibility. And I just wanted to say thank you for sharing this time and space with me and for giving me this opportunity to share it with you. I pray that it's fruitful for all of us. It's so good to be with you this morning. I hope you're glad to be here this morning as well.

According to the most recent Gallup polls published by the Barna Group, just this year, in 2024, regular weekly church attendance is down 20%, meaning only one in five churchgoers actually attend church every week. And I can already hear some of you scoffing, "Once a week? When I was a kid..." because I know some of us grew up attending church multiple times a week, right? Some of us, who shall remain nameless, may have even elected to attend three different youth groups of different denominations in high school, all in addition to attending church, church choir, and leading youth Bible studies. And I know, I mean, they weren't the only ones that kept a calendar like that, but they loved church. But if you grew up attending church because someone else decided that you were going to attend church, it wouldn't surprise me if, when you graduated high school or moved out of your family home on your own, that decision remained someone else's decision and not yours, and so therefore not one you made for yourself.

But let's be real, because that's our aim around here, even those of us who didn't stop attending church, many of us were still attending, at least in part or on some level, because of other people, out of obligation. Obligation to our parents or society, or the old ladies that were unofficially but also very officially taking attendance, or even out of obligation to God. Note, not from God, but out of an obligation to God. And there's a lot of fear in obligation. But fear isn't what God is after. Second Timothy, chapter one, verse seven, says, "For God has not given us a spirit of fear. God has given us a spirit of power, a spirit of love, and a spirit of a sound mind." First John 4:18 and 19 says, "There's no fear in love. In fact, perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. No, we love because God first loved us. We love. We love here and we love without fear." You've heard that, right, loving fearlessly?

And I love that about us, doing things fearlessly without fear, from our mission statement of loving without fear to our core values: Grace without fear, equity without fear, diversity without fear, inclusion without fear, remaining without fear, disagreeing without fear, seeking without fear, curiosity without fear, multiplication, and succession without fear. I love these attributes about us and how they create and hold this space in which all of us can encounter God and experience Jesus and Holy Spirit together.

And we all do our parts by showing up and by the way that we show up, and by bringing ourselves and our opinions, our thoughts and theologies, our questions and curiosities, our black and white and our gray, our certainty and our spectrum, our creeds and our deeds, our expertise and existential crises, all of it.

How, you ask? Well, by acknowledging no one knows for sure. No one really knows for sure. And by believing that the direction my eyes and my feet are pointed matters more than where they are positioned in this moment, where they are pointed more than where they are positioned, is what matters. That centered set. That's that idea we talk about here, centered set. We all come from where we all come from. We're all standing where we're all standing right now. And rather than debate that position, we accept it and we move forward. We acknowledge it and focus our energy on the direction of our seeking, as we observed Jesus do.

Sometimes we can expend a lot of energy trying to clean it all up, right? I don't think I'm the only one. I don't think you're the only one, either, Cindy. You just had my back, trying to present a perfectly curated life, or we expend just as much energy portraying a tough, impenetrable facade. But both of those things and all the other iterations of ourselves are just a slice of our life, placed on a slide and framed under a microscope at just the right magnification to control the intended narrative. But we live in a much bigger, less controlled, and less controllable context. It's messy. I have four children, four beautiful, messy human beings that

Eric and I love dearly. And our youngest, who's eight, requested that we watch Inside Out this Friday night for family movie night, and I was struck all over again by how accurate this depiction of our internal dialogue, or scripts, as Pastor Bob used to call them, is. The original movie highlights the journey of Riley, this main character through five internal characters: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust. And the crystallization point is that so much of life isn't one thing. It isn't joy or sadness, but a mix of joy and sadness. Joy, who wants to keep Riley happy all the time, witnesses the power of sadness as she sits with others in their pain, and how that simple act of joining them made them feel better, acknowledging the beauty of grief as a practice, not a problem to solve or a problem to avoid. And in this latest edition of Inside Out 2, Riley turns 13, enters puberty, and introduces Anxiety, Envy, Embarrassment, and On to the cast of inner characters. And this personification of emotions is really powerful and helpful, even for adults, which is why it became the highest-grossing animated film of all time at \$1.7 billion, that's billion with a B. And from there, I won't spoil anything further, in case you haven't seen it yet, because it's worth the watch.

But they do a really great job of portraying the reality that life is complicated and it's never just one thing. I've been studying faith this year. We started this sermon series in January, and the lessons have been surprising and unexpected. I think the people in Hebrews 11 were a mess too. Upon reflection, it seems that faith might have been more ascribed to them in hindsight than something they adorned themselves with in the moment. And this final lesson was no exception for me. Perhaps it was the most surprising and unexpected one yet. I certainly did not see this coming when I started my prep. But in it, I can see that God did, and that they see where we're going next. I can see their intentionality and the inspiration for our next sermon series that starts next Sunday.

But let me not get ahead of myself. Today, I am tasked with the series wrap, the conclusion, or at least a conclusion. Vision as I am, this is the third or fourth series wrap sermon on Hebrews 11 at this point, but I don't know how I feel about wrapping things up. Well, actually, I do know. I don't like it. I mean, physically, sure. My in-laws have always told me, for years, that the way I wrap and present a present is itself half the gift. But in life, tying up loose ends and putting a bow on it just isn't me. Because, as I've explained, it just isn't life. A life with no loose ends isn't real. So, for this morning's series wrap, I present a series unwrap. Sorry, closureists, today is not your day. Neat and tidies, brace yourself. It's going to be a bumpy ride.

And in the spirit of unwrapping, I felt the best way to bring this baby to a conclusion was by going all the way back to the beginning, naturally. So, will you come with me? If not, you don't have much choice. My text for today was Hebrews 12, verses one through 11. But in true unwrapping fashion, I invite you to ignore that with me and turn instead to Hebrews chapter 11, verses one through three. Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. Do you remember this from January? This is what the ancients were

commended for. By faith, we understand that the universe was formed at God's command so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. Did you catch it? A surprising, unexpected twist that's been hiding in plain sight from the very beginning of this sermon series, like a great Christopher Nolan movie, or like the earlier, more successful works of M. Night Shyamalan. Still rooting for him, by the way. Hidden among the preface, I discovered one last "by faith" statement, the unintended one, like the Horcrux Voldemort never intended to make: verse three by faith. We, does that blow your minds? By faith, we. I was not ready for this. Not only could we be members of the hall of faith, but we already are. Not honorary, could-be members, but full-fledged, card-carrying members. By faith, we understand.

And let me just say, I couldn't have done it without you. No, literally, I couldn't have done it without you, because it isn't "by faith, I," it's "by faith, we." And our great act of faith, the one thing that singled out and placed us into the hall of faith, is by faith, we understand. Pistis nao nio. Pistis is the word we've been journeying with every week for the whole year, by faith. The next word in this statement by faith, pistus na ao na. ao means to understand, to perceive, to consider, to think. This is a verb, but it's written in the present active indicative tense. And what is the present active indicative tense? I thought you'd never ask. Boom, baby. Greek grammar school: a crash course for Christians, the operative word being grammar. Greek verbs communicate four things: they communicate tense, voice, mood, and inflection.

Number one, the concept of tense communicates the timing of the action. In our case, it's present tense, which we actually understand. This aspect of grammar will yield the remainder of its time to the floor as we move on to the next elements.

Number two concerns the voice, which offers three options: active, passive, and middle. Voice indicates the direction of the action. Active voice shows the subject as the one performing the action, such as "God forgives sins." Passive voice means the action happens to the subject, illustrated by "Sinners are forgiven by God." The middle voice would imply that the action happened both by and to the subject, for example, "Pilate washed his hands and forgave himself," where he was the one giving and receiving that forgiveness. Our verb is active, putting us in the driver's seat.

Number three is about mood, which describes the manner in which the action takes place. There are four moods in Greek: indicative, imperative, subjunctive, and infinitive. The indicative mood affirms the actuality or factuality of a statement, such as "God loves the world." The imperative mood expresses a command, like "Love thy neighbor." The subjunctive mood infers a contingency, such as "if you love God..." And the infinitive mood, which doesn't commit to a person or a number, brings an infinite aspect, like "to love is good."

If you're following along, our use of the present active indicative tense communicates that the action is happening in the present time, the subject is the one carrying it out, and it is indeed a true statement. This brings us to number four, inflection, which essentially means to bend. If you've ever studied a foreign language in school, you might understand this as conjugation. There are six inflections: first, second, and third person singular (I, you, he, she, it) and first, second, and third person plural (we, you, they). Our verb inflection is in the first-person plural, "we," meaning all of us are presently, actively engaged in this action, truly according to God, using our minds.

The Greek word here is "noose," which means mind. This verb takes the noun root and transforms it into a verb. Technically, it's to be mindful, converting that noun into an action. This encapsulates high context, which is quite enlightening.

Does that blow your mind? I hope not, because you're going to need it. But seriously, our great act of faith is that we think; we perceive with our minds, we consider, we turn the gem and together we understand—this is faith. Our act of faith isn't knowing; it's thinking. Our act of faith isn't a feeling; it's mindfulness. Our act of faith isn't certainty; it's consideration, and in this verse, it is something we do together as we.

And I love this because I love us. Remember, you're the reason that I'm here. God goes everywhere I go. I don't need to come to church to meet with God. I come to church to meet with all of you and to meet with God together with you. I experience God in and through and alongside you. And I love gathering with you, seeing your faces, hearing your voices, feeling your hugs, handshakes, and fist bumps. If I unwrap that further, seeing your hearts, your joys, and your sorrows, hearing your stories, both your trials and your triumphs, and feeling your presence at the table, both your support and your challenges. I also love God and myself and my neighbor better because of spending time with all of you, I understand God, myself, and my neighbor better after spending time here with all of you, and hopefully the same is true for you. Otherwise, what's the point?

And to continue the unwrapping, or perhaps unraveling at this point, while I love a good grammar lesson, I share all of that for a reason. This word in this rebel verse I picked, instead of the one I was given, was thoughtfully used here. There are a total of 108 combinations a Greek verb can have when you mix up all of those variations we just talked about, and yet they chose this one. And when we unwrap its meaning, it can mean so much more to us than in its wrapped-up state. Sure, saying, "By faith, we understand," has a certain utility. It gets the job done, but because the thinking was done by someone else, the one who first thought it and wrote it down, and then by the one who translated it into English, we can kind of just glaze over it so much of the time.

But when we come together with the author's thoughts and with the interpreters' word choices and with other interpreters and commentators, and together with all of us here in this room, there's an opportunity to exercise an act of faith that is worthy of the annals of church history. By faith, we reason together. And perhaps I glossed over tense too quickly. In the Greek, present tense doesn't only mean now; present tense indicates a continuing action, something that happens continuously, happens while happening repeatedly, something that is in the process of happening. And can you feel this all unwrapping in your mind? By faith, we think while thinking, while pondering and considering and reconsidering together.

It was never meant to be a one-time deal; by faith, these are the waters we live in. This ambiguity is what we learn to trust, and this is so critical to me, because growing up, I always thought of faith as something firm, any of you too, like really firm, an immovable foundation, something that you build your beliefs upon in one place that does not move. But something breaks when faith becomes firm, when love becomes law, when judges become kings, or when tents become temples, when what was meant to move is cemented, when what was meant as someone to come with is swapped for somewhere you must go. When living waters become idle pools, you can't dance with a statue, and you weren't meant to.

That's the thing. Life keeps moving. It just keeps moving. You get evicted from your apartment, you lose your job, you have a miscarriage or three, or you struggle with infertility, you don't find a soulmate, you don't get that house with the yard and the white picket fence, and you start to wonder, did I not have enough faith?

Is faith a commodity? Is faith a currency? Is it something finite that you either have or don't have, or have enough of, or don't have enough of? Or is faith a companion, or is faith a community? A faith like this can join you on the waves of life like Jesus did. It can join you in your sadness and wade into the waters of your grief alongside you. And a faith like this can also celebrate the joys of life with you.

In conclusion, faith isn't something we wrap up and tie down, and I don't think it ever was. Faith moved with Abel among his flocks, walked with Enoch, and weathered the rains with Noah. It grieved with Adam and Sarah—Abraham and Sarah in their infertility—and rejoiced with them in the birth of Isaac. Faith wove through generation after generation of sibling rivalry with Isaac and Jacob and Joseph to weave brothers back together.

Faith carried the vulnerable hopes of Moses as they placed him in that basket, followed Moses into the desert and back into Egypt, and then into the desert again. Faith was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It raised the Red Sea and lowered the walls of Jericho. Faith tied a red cord in the window of Rahab and then took that cord and wove a sex worker into the lineage of the Messiah.

Faith was the flickering of the flame in the lamps of Gideon's army, a tent peg in the hand of Jael, the even greater strength of repentance of Samson, and the grace for Jephthah. Faith moved from the lips of Hannah to the ears of God and from the lips of God to the ears of Samuel, turning prayer into prophecy. Faith moved beyond what man could see into the heart of David. It moved with him from fields of sheep to fields of battle to fields of forgiveness.

And faith moves with us together as we think while thinking, examine while examining, and consider while reconsidering. And we don't need to be afraid, for we've not been given a spirit of fear. What have we been given? A spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

This is why I believe God encouraged us to continue the practice of meeting together, not only to be with them, because, again, they are always with us, but because faith is best expressed and best understood in our collective reasoning together. We stumbled onto this idea as a leadership team by contemplating how churches could move forward without continuously fracturing into smaller and smaller sects and denominations and sub-denominations and non-denominations. We asked the question: Is there a third way? We're all familiar with the first two when we encounter a disagreement—we either agree to agree and force compliance and conformance, or we agree to disagree and separate, coalescing in factions of like-mindedness. Both of which we felt missed the mark, because you just end up surrounding yourself with people who already believe the same thing that you believe. And we believe the gift of community is something more than that, something that's beyond ourselves.

So, what else is there? Disagree to agree. Abide in disagreement. How would you remain even when our positions seem oppositional? Well, you shift from position to orientation. We agree on the destination, Jesus and His love. We collectively listen. We collectively choose love over being right. We put being right on the altar as a sacrifice in order to remain in this third way. Sometimes it hurts the ego, but man, does it make up for it? And then some in community. This idea isn't new. It's actually been the way people navigated the physical world for centuries using multiple points of reference.

So, let me share this another way. Imagine this: Imagine God as the North Pole, and imagine that we were as a church. We told you, this is the one way to the North Pole. This is the direction. This is true north—walk exactly in this one direction. Well, try as we might, it wouldn't take long for us to veer off that course, even though it was clear, go this way, even though it was delivered with certainty, go this way. Or even if it was delivered with fear that to depart from this singular course would mean certain death. We, every one of us, would fail. But say we didn't. Say we kept walking north without deviation. Eventually, we would run out of landmass, but again, say we didn't. Eventually, we would reach the North Pole, cross over it, and keep going. If all we are given is a direction without being given an ability to reason and

perceive and use all of our God-given abilities to think, to seek, we could march objectively in the "right" direction and miss the destination and end up as far or farther away on the other side.

But being here together with us and the Spirit of God within each of us provides multiple data points from all around this multi-dimensional sphere, like satellites surrounding the globe, and like the stars that were used by explorers who learned how to read them, to inform and re-inform their course. Because life, sometimes life feels like being out at sea, and there isn't anything solid, like a land mass visible to orient ourselves. And sometimes storms blow us off course, and what we need is to learn to reason, perceive, think, question, and seek, and one point of view doesn't help us orient, just like one star can't guide us. But reading the relationships between multiple stars, multiple points of reference that can. It's how our GPSs work, using multiple satellites to triangulate our position in a three-dimensional world. And if we can't even navigate a three-dimensional world without multiple points of reference, how do we expect to navigate the spiritual terrain, or the emotional relational terrain, or the internal terrain?

But by faith, together, we seek together, we think together. We understand a little bit better. Our faith moves with us, and our faith moves among us just like our God. Alright, enough of me talking at you. The whole point of this is that it's the work of all of us doing this together, of actually exercising this gift. And so, I wanted to invite the children back in because they're as much a part of our together and our 'US-ness' as we are. And so, I wanted them to be here to participate in this exercise too. So, I would like everyone to partner up. Just pick one other person, preferably a person other than the person with whom you came find as Somebody, a somebody you didn't come with, 54321, 321, we. All right, does everyone have a partner? Are we partnered up kids? Find a partner too. You're a part of this exercise. Find another kid, not your brother or sister, someone you didn't ride here in a car with and partner up with one of them.

I'm going to put five questions up on the screen. You are going to choose one of them. I will give you one minute by timer to consider your story. Then, I will say 'go'. When I say 'go', the person that's closest to the gathering room, on this side of your partner, is going to go first. After that, I will give them a chance to share their story, then I will say 'switch', and the person that is on the parking lot side of the partnership will go second. Can we get the questions up on the screen?

Question one, kids. I really like this question. This might be one. You can use any of them, but maybe this one helps or makes the most sense. If I was going to become a good friend of yours, what would be the most important thing for me to know about you? Go deep. If I was

going to become a good friend of yours, what would be the most important thing for me to know about you?

Number two, this is more of a prompt. You could start your story this way: "At the time, this felt like the darkest night of my soul," and then continue.

Number three, right now, I am really overwhelmed by [blank] and then talk about it.

Number four, one of the hardest challenges of my life was letting go of [blank].

And number five, when was the last time you really cried in front of someone?

Alright, I'm going to set a timer for one minute. You can choose a question, a prompt, consider your story, and then when I say 'Go', the person that's closest to the gathering room will start. So, good morning again church. I hope that you're all still glad that you came here this morning. I hope that you're all still glad for being here this morning. The gift of being together again, for me, is the reason we're all here today.

This isn't just because God isn't important to us, but because God goes everywhere with us. God is with me in the car, on the ride home. He was with me on the way here. He is with me when I rise, when I go to bed, even if I make my bed in the depths. He is there with me, right? We've heard this. We come together as a church community because there's something special about us being together with one another and about meeting with God together alongside one another and with the Imago Dei of God that's within each of us.

I did that exercise because I wanted us to realize that there is power in our stories. If you reflect on the story you shared, if you reflect on the story you heard, I'm positive you could hear faith moving through it. Because life is so fluid, a rigid faith would fracture. If it couldn't bend with life, when life blew, or when the waves moved, or when you moved, it would break. But gratefully, faith is something that moves along with us. It moves right along, around, and through us, and this gift of our togetherness is what we're going to be spending the next sermon series going into. I'm not going to say too much about it, but it's going to be an exploration and an experimentation for us to take topics and to dive into them and to hear it shared. We'll see how it reflects and moves through all the different voices of the preaching and teaching team and through the questions and voices of all of you.