

This teacher was asked to tutor a boy in the hospital. “Work with him on nouns and adverbs,” she was told, “so he doesn’t fall behind.” That seemed simple enough – until she got to his room in the hospital burn unit. There she learned that her new student had been trapped in a fire; the boy was lucky to be alive. He was bandaged all over and obviously in pain. Awkwardly, she said, “I’m your tutor. I’m here to help you with nouns and adverbs.” As you can imagine, the boy barely responded. Even so, the teacher did what she was there to do. She talked about nouns and adverbs, thinking the whole time how senseless it was to put him through all that. Well, the next day when she came back, his nurse stopped her in the hall. “What did you do to that boy?” she asked. The teacher started apologizing, but the nurse said, “No, no, you don’t understand. We’ve been very worried about him, but ever since your visit, his attitude has changed. He’s fighting back. He’s responding to treatment. It’s amazing!” As the teacher went in the room, she saw the change for herself. Puzzled, she told the boy what the nurse had said, then asked him, “What made the difference?” “Simple,” he answered, “I have hope now. I mean, if I were dying, they wouldn’t send you in to work on nouns and adverbs, would they?”

“I have hope now!” Hope! What a difference it makes! Any kind of hope, really. Even this “nouns and adverbs” kind. Hope that things will get better. Hope that dreams will come true. Hope that something great and glorious awaits beyond the horizon. Hope! Well has it been said that we *“can live forty days without food, three days without water, eight minutes without air, but not one second without hope.”*

True as this may be, though, we also know that not all hopes are equally valid. For instance, as much as I hate to say it, this boy’s “nouns and adverbs” hope may have been a false hope – based on a false assumption. It may have helped for the moment but meant nothing over the long haul. Some hopes are like that.

Just as some hopes are based on wishful thinking – hoping we’ll do well on a test; hoping we’ll get a raise; hoping we’ll get some special gift for Christmas. Such hopes may be fun while they last, but they can turn out to be false hopes, too, ones that leave us bitterly disappointed.

And that’s also the case with hopes based on appearances. Do you remember the conversation in today’s Gospel, where the disciples talked about the size of the temple, the size of the stones – how massive and permanent it all seemed! Some hopes appear the same way. In recent years, a lot of us bought stock in companies that appeared indestructible. *What huge assets that company has! What a great leadership team! What a wise business plan! Surely, my funds will be safe with them!* That was our hope. But appearances can be deceiving. Impossible as it seemed when Jesus foretold it, that massive temple was

destroyed in 66 A.D. Not one stone was left on top of another. And impossible as it seemed, some massive corporations were also destroyed in 2008 – along with some of our financial hopes. So not all hopes are equally valid. Not by a long shot! And that makes it all the more important to be sure we have the right hope and we put our trust in that hope alone. This, in fact, is the point of our text: **“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful.”**

Now, we Christians certainly have the right hope! No problem there! In fact, we have the best hope there is – a hope based on more than assumptions, more than appearances, more than wishful thinking. Our hope is in God – our utterly faithful God. And our hope is based on His proven track record – what He has done *“for us and for our salvation.”* The symbols of our hope are not impressive: a humble manger, an old rugged cross, an empty tomb. But each one provides proof that God is faithful, God keeps His promises come what may. In that humble manger God placed His Son, Jesus – keeping His promise to send us a Savior. On the old rugged cross, Jesus atoned for our sins – keeping God’s promise of forgiveness. And it didn’t stop there! Just when all hope seemed lost, just when Jesus lay dead and buried, God emptied His tomb, God raised up Jesus, God gave Him victory over death – and as He did, God gave us proof that we can even trust His promise of eternal life, as Jesus said: **“Because I live, you will live also.”** Yes, we have the right hope! We have the best hope there is – a hope based on fact, a hope based on proof that **“He who has promised is faithful!”**

Such hope is packed with potential! Really, it ought to make a huge difference in our lives! I mean, if even a flimsy hope can make some difference, surely the right hope should make all the difference in the world! But does it? That depends on what we do with our hope, whether we make full use of it. It’s not enough to just have the right hope up here [*head*]. It only makes a difference when it sinks in here [*heart*]. Trusting God here [*heart*], depending on God here [*heart*], claiming His promises here [*heart*] – that’s how hope makes a difference!

Case in point: some twenty years ago I brought Communion to an older woman named Wanda. She was dying of cancer, so death was very much on her mind. Now, Wanda had grown up in the church – baptized, confirmed, Luther League, Women’s Circle, and she attended church most every Sunday. She knew Scripture, knew the Catechism, so I assumed she was spiritually prepared. She wasn’t. Intellectually, she knew the right answers, but in her heart she was unsure. In fact, she told me, “I just hope I’ve done enough to be saved.” That caught me off guard! “Wanda,” I said, “you know better than that! You know you can’t earn your way into heaven.” “Of course,” she replied. “But still, I want to be on the safe side...” “Wanda,” I said, “there’s only one safe side. That’s trusting in Jesus, trusting in what Jesus did for you on the cross, trusting that He saved you by grace alone.” For a moment, she was very quiet. I could almost see the wheels turning. So that seemed a good time to open my Communion kit and

prepare to give her the sacrament. As I did, a Bible verse occurred to me – a different one than I had planned to read. The verse was from Ephesians chapter 2: “**By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not because of works, that no one may boast.**” Wanda knew this verse, of course. No doubt she’d memorized it as a child in Sunday School. But now, it was not just a verse for her. It was God speaking to her personally. It was God assuring her personally. It was God bolstering her hope personally – and reminding her what the *right* hope really is. As she received Jesus in the sacrament, she received His grace, received His forgiveness, received all she needed to “be on the safe side.” And I didn’t have to point this out. She realized it on her own. In fact, when I prayed for her after Communion, she prayed, too: “*Lord, thank You that Your grace is sufficient for me. Just help me to trust You, Lord. Just help me to trust Your promises.*” And He did. In fact, on another visit she even apologized for having such a “silly attitude. What kind of a Lutheran am I, anyway?” We both laughed and agreed that that was covered by grace, too. But let me tell you, what a difference I saw in Wanda! What a difference all the way up to her final moments here on earth. The hope she had up here [*head*] of being saved by grace alone really sank in here [*heart*] and filled her with hope. Trusting God here [*heart*], depending on God here [*heart*], claiming His promises here [*heart*] – for Wanda, *that’s* how hope made a difference!

It can for anyone. It can for you and me. We have the best hope there is – in life or in death – and the more firmly we trust in God, depend on God, claim his promises *here* [*heart*], the more this hope will make a difference in our lives. No doubt, that is why our text emphasizes: “**Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope...**” Don’t take it for granted. Don’t treat it lightly. Don’t let it just be an intellectual thing. Hold it fast! And more to the point, that’s why our text tells us to hold fast to our hope “**without wavering.**”

Let’s be clear: “**wavering**” is a problem. “**Wavering**” sabotages hope. “**Wavering**” steals its peace and power. “**Wavering**” is something we want to avoid like the plague. And we can do that. It’s possible. “**Wavering**” is something we can control.

It may not seem like we can. People often claim they can’t help “**wavering.**” Their brains just go off in all directions – “*What if this?*” “*How come that?*” – and before they know it, their hope is gone! But even if that’s true, what does it really tell us? That “**wavering**” is a brain thing? Sure. Doubting, worrying, second-guessing – it all happens up here [*head*]. But that does beg the question: *Whose brain is it anyway?* And it begs a further question: *Who is in control of our thoughts?* We don’t have to be their hopeless little victims. Even if circumstances send our thoughts scattering in all directions, we’re still in control. And more to the point, we know something that *trumps* all the “What-ifs” and “How comes.” We know that *Christian* hope is *not* a brain thing. It’s not based on intellectual assumptions. It’s not based on wishful thinking. It’s not based on

how things appear. Not at all! Our hope is based on a Person: God. It's based on a relationship with this Person – a Person who loves us unconditionally, has made us specific promises, and has a perfect track record keeping His promises. That's what our hope is based on. And especially when our brains start messing with us, that Person is who we need to focus on – because all the “What-ifs” and “How comes” in the world can't change the fact that **“He who has promised is faithful.”** **“He who has promised is faithful,”** and so long as we trust in Him, we always have hope!

In the Old Testament, that's what made the difference for Jeremiah, surveying the ruins of Jerusalem. For all his lamentations, he knew what to do when his brain started messing with him. He turned his focus on God and reminded himself what he knew about God, what he knew deep down in here [*heart*]: **“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.”**

Likewise, in the New Testament, that's what made the difference for Paul. As he faced his troubles and persecutions, how many times did he turn his focus on God, reminding himself what he knew deep down in here [*heart*]? **“God is faithful, and He will do it!”** **“God is faithful! He will strengthen and protect you from evil.”** **“Even if we be faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.”**

You see? We don't have to let our minds mess with us. We don't have to let our thoughts make us hopeless little victims. **“Wavering”** is preventable – even when push comes to shove. What made the difference for Paul and Jeremiah can make the difference for us, too. The secret is taking charge of our thoughts, focusing them on God instead of “What-ifs” and “How-comes;” keeping in mind what kind of God we have, that **“He who has promised is faithful.”** And even more, the secret is letting that assurance sink in here [*heart*] – trusting God here [*heart*], depending on God here [*heart*], claiming His promises here [*heart*]. That's how we'll make full use of our hope.

We have the right hope. We have the best hope there – in life or in death. So what do we do with it? The invitation before us is clear: **“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful.”**