

Life between the verses

By [Edwin Searcy](#)

February 10, 2008

Reading the assigned texts for this week overwhelms me. The call of Abram is told like a Haiku—just a few words, yet the mystery of our life as God’s people hinges on this ancient call and response. After the spare text in Genesis, the passages in Romans and John read like dense thickets of complicated sentences and layered metaphors. Together the texts wrestle with the need for faith, the longing for faith, the mystery of faith.

I panic. Of course we need faith. It goes without saying. Yet how will I speak in a way that does not turn our believing in God into just another good work? Paul knows that such trust in God does not earn the label “righteous” (Rom. 4:4-5). Jesus tells Nicodemus that this trust is a new life given “from above” by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-6). Faith is God’s gift, and the sign of God’s faithfulness. Yet as soon as I begin to speak about faith in Bible studies or in sermons I sense people feeling guilty because they do not believe “enough.”

A great change occurred in my own preaching when I realized this: I had mistakenly assumed that I was preaching to a company of believers. I had thought of my task as giving them direction on what to do *now that* they believed. But electricity began to run through my preaching when I began to preach to a people who live everyday somewhere between verse one and verse two of Psalm 121. “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?” “My help comes from the Lord.”

In a sermon years ago, a preacher said that when we recite this psalm there should be a long silence after verse one. This is a psalm for pilgrims making the arduous climb up to Jerusalem—a pilgrimage not unlike our journey from Ash Wednesday to Holy Week. In the biblical journey the pilgrims saw Canaanite temples to Ba’al on every hilltop between Galilee and Jerusalem. When they looked to the hills they saw the promises of idols scraping the sky. I imagine my congregation going to work downtown in a similar landscape of idolatry.

Naming this tension freed me to claim our life together as a life of resistance—resisting those forces, those idols, that would deny us the gift of God’s faith. I began to realize that I did not need to tell people what to do, but rather, in this post-Christian location on the North American continent, my preaching is more like that of a missionary—announcing that our lives “rest on grace” (Rom. 4:16). To my delight, once they accept this truth, disciples regularly discover what it is that Christ calls them to do as a sign of God’s new creation.

The rest of Psalm 121 seems very assured, like a great hymn of certitude in God, but it is actually a suspense-filled drama in which the story of God’s faithfulness is at great risk. This is not a psalm of philosophical certitude; it is a daring love song that is sung in the face of the idols to ward off the doubt and disbelief that pulls us from God like an unseen magnetic force. Perhaps that is the shape of a faith and a sermon and a people that is reckoned as righteousness—not philosophical certitude but passionate love for God.