

October 13, Ordinary 28B (Hebrews 4:12-16)

## **One of the most underrated spiritual gifts is perseverance.**

by [Clint Schnekloth](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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“Naked and laid bare” is not the most comfortable position in which to utter the liturgical response “Thanks be to God,” and yet this is precisely how Hebrews graphically imagines creatures like us exposed to “the gospel of our Lord.” Word of God as stripping and skewering us. It’s a miracle anyone attends worship.

Yet somehow the author of Hebrews imagines their work—and the piercing and judging work of the word of God—as encouragement, an uplifting word ensuring we hold fast to our confession, “run[ning] the race set before us” (12:1).

This begs an existential question: What helps you keep going? Are you the type to simply take one day at a time, rarely pondering the bigger question of purpose? Or are you always purpose driven, fully engaged in meaning-making? Or is life more overwhelming, coming at you so hard and quick you’re rarely given the opportunity to ponder the question at all?

It appears the author of Hebrews has spent a considerable amount of time pondering what might encourage the book’s community of readers to keep going, to press on, and the answer they arrive at is a startling one. It is the faithfulness of one who has been tested.

I’ve long been persuaded that one of the most underrated spiritual gifts is perseverance. Although our culture flocks to charisma and novelty, the unsung heroes in many places are the steadfast, the ones who stay, who persevere in spite of opposition, especially the opposition of time itself. Hebrews emphasizes that Jesus was tempted, but at least as important is that he was tempted in every respect as we are. He is tested repeatedly, and over a long duration.

As I look around in our local community for those who persevere, I especially think of Laura, a local human rights advocate who, now in her 80s, has spent the past few months collecting signatures for multiple ballot initiatives here in the state of Arkansas. This is laborious work, staffing tables while asking every person she sees, “Have you signed the petition?” Laura shows up everywhere—in our narthex, at the farmer’s market, at the Pride parade—and makes her small but crucial contribution to the larger effort of facilitating an opportunity for the interests of voters to be heard over the authoritarian work of ideologue officials.

There’s no guarantee she’ll gather enough signatures, no guarantee the initiative will gain sufficient votes in the fall, and yet every day she holds fast and moves with boldness. She just keeps showing up. As I have pondered how to encourage her, it has occurred to me that I could and probably should share with her the narrative of solidarity that Hebrews offers, that Jesus is there and has been tested with her, unsure that his efforts would be rewarded, entirely able to sympathize with her weakness.

I write this in early July 2024, the week the Supreme Court handed down a decision in *United States v. Donald J. Trump* that elevates US presidents above the law and grants them the immunity of kings. By the time you read this the election will be imminent and the fate of the United States as a free nation will hang in the balance. Promises of Jesus’ solidarity may ring even more empty and fragile.

Perhaps we can remember, however, that the political context during which Hebrews was written was at least as fraught. Somehow the author found the courage to radically narrate Jesus’ deep solidarity with us in our temptations, even our temptations to despondency and despair. May this promised solidarity facilitate an approach to God’s throne in hope, and may the authority of Jesus as Lord serve as a counter-imperial antidote to presidents retrogressively receiving the divine right of kings.

Also, am I the only one who is exhausted by having been forced to imagine a presidential candidate “naked and laid bare” and wishing they were required, for once, to render a truthful account? The influence of fake news and outright lies on our shared life makes the threat in Hebrews of a truth-revealing sword almost appealing.