Three million Four Hundred and Fifty six thousand seconds.  That is how many moments are in forty days. I know this because since my wife and I began the Whole 30 for Lent, a diet that requires going without sugar, and dairy, and grains, and beans, and soy, and alcohol, and most, if not all, the foods of comfort we enjoy, we have been counting every second.  For many of us, the plodding trek from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday has been particularly exhausting, filled with deadlines, and assignments, and events, and unforeseen calamities that have caused us to stretch ourselves above and beyond what we or anyone could really call reasonable. As we return from the last real break, or what has hopefully been an final opportunity for a normal sleep schedule,  before we again enter the thralls of the end of semester push, graduating seniors are indubitably aware that as of today three million four hundred and fifty six thousand seconds are all that remain between us and graduation day. And we are certainly not alone in our mental and physical anticipation and expectation for what it is going to take to get through the next week or month or year. I am sure each of us can look at our calendar with at least a little dread of impending appointments.  Ordination exams, internship orientations, twenty to thirty pages of position papers, theological reflections, exegetical research, meetings, conferences, chapter deadlines, publishing requirements, youth ministry fundraisers for summer mission trips, worship planning for Holy week, and on and on and on and on. And though we have heard witness of those who have seen the mountaintop, in the midst of all our responsibilities, it is difficult to see it for ourselves. It feels as though we are just holding on.

The community to which the author of Hebrews is speaking is having similar feelings.  New Testament scholar, M. Eugene Boring, suggests that this particular community is most likely second generation Christians.  Their faith has been formed partly around proclamations of the coming kingdom of God, which is imminent. Yet, year after year has passed, and this community is becoming restless in the “not yet”ness of the coming kingdom.  The imminence of this coming kingdom is being tested by the critical doubt of time. This community’s faith has exposed it to persecution, ridicule and imprisonment. They are beginning to feel as though if they only keep their heads down, and keep a low profile, they might just be able to hold on.  The anxiety and stress of all of the growing responsibilities and the anxiety and stress of being a community beginning to doubt whether the coming of the kingdom is really that imminent are similar feelings, and it is as though we are all just hanging on.

It’s a precarious feeling.  I recently felt a similar anxiety watching Alex Honnold become the first person to climb the granite wall, El Capitan, without ropes.  The story of this incredible feat was the focus of an Oscar award winning documentary called Free Solo. As the photographic camera lens of National Geographic zoom in from a meadow in Yosemite valley, at the base of El Capitan, all the way up, two thousand feet, to Alex hanging onto the side of this granite wall, barely grasping the small cracks and protrusions with the very tips of his fingers and toes, my blood pressure and concern began to feel very palpable.  How was he not freaking out, as I have been all semester, when he looks down and sees how far he could fall, how great his failure could be? During one interview, Alex explains his calmness and why he does not view his free soloing as very risky. Mind you less than one percent of climbers ever attempt free soloing because of the dangers and the high likelihood of injury and death. Alex said the risk of falling is pretty low in his mind (given his extensive training and preparation). The consequences, however, are high.

We are well aware of the consequences in our own lives, consequences of not holding on.  Failure, regret, letting people we love down, squandering the blessings we have been given, letting our churches, or our organizations, or our seminary close, dishonoring God, or losing ourselves in the process of “succeeding.” The community of faith to whom Hebrews is addressed understand the consequences as well, persecution, ridicule, imprisonment, and even death.  And when we are holding on, and looking down at the consequences, we cannot help but be discouraged and afraid. We so easily find ourselves looking up at what’s to come or down at the consequences, we forget to ask the question about what we are holding onto.

So what are we holding onto?  How often do we find ourselves clinging to the worldly things?  Money, power, influence, privilege. Sometimes it’s not as obvious as those things.  Sometimes it’s the fiduciary faith we practice, when we withhold the hospitality Christ calls us to show out of fear that to do so would end in economic ruin.  Sometimes it is our participation in systems of injustice with very just intentions. Sometimes we hold on to the way we do things because “that’s the way it has always been done.”  Sometimes we hold onto to our own biases, our own ways of thinking, our own social locations and patterns of behavior because we are afraid to be seen as the one who sticks out. You see, just like our brothers and sisters in Christ hearing this message from Hebrews in their own home churches at the turn of the first century, the things we often hold on to are the things that allow us to keep a low profile, to limit our exposure to ridicule.  The author of Hebrews, leading up to our verses today, encourages the audience to not fall back into the Jewish tradition of sacrifices, which the author contends is unnecessary, “for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin.” You see being Christian in an out-front way was a precarious position, and the audience of Hebrews was just trying to hold on. But we shouldn’t hold on to those things anymore, because eventually they will not stand up to the weight of our lives.  They can give us a false sense of confidence, but true confidence is only found in Christ.

“We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,and since we have a great priest over the house of God.” In Christ, we have confidence, confidence in who Jesus is and what Jesus did.  And when I say what Jesus did, you have a pretty good idea of what I am talking about. We have not all been spending countless hours preparing and planning up to five consecutive days of distinct services culminating in the largest worship service of the year, because Jesus merely took his disciples to dinner.  As dedicated followers of Christ and readers of Scripture, plus the thousands of emails surrounding that particular liturgical time in the life of the church, we know what is coming next week. But our confidence does not come from what we know our faithfulness. Our confidence comes from Christ’s faithfulness.  Christ Jesus chooses us, in every moment his life, and in his death and resurrection continues to choose us. There is no better week than this to hold onto that, the idea that Christ chooses what is to come, for us. It might be easier for us to think that Jesus had no choice. He prophesized to his own death on multiple occasions, and if we are playing the results, we might say there is no Christianity if it doesn’t happen the way Scripture says it does.  Yet let us for a moment believe that God is indeed the creator of all things, the sovereign power of all that is created, the source of all love and life, and let us not take from God the choice to choose differently. The choice is even more miraculous when we consider that Jesus knew what was going to happen to him, and still chooses us, still chooses to endure the suffering, the pain, the humiliation. And though in the almost two thousand years since, as we have given countless examples of why we are not worthy of Jesus’ choice, he continues to choose us!  Our confidence does not come from our own faithfulness, it comes from Christ’s.

And so we gather, and in the sacraments of baptism and communion we remember the enduring faithfulness of Christ.  And as a result of that faithfulness, Christ has opened for us, for all of time, a new and living way, rolling back forever the curtains of hindrance, that we may “draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”  And we are able to do so confidently because “he who promised is faithful.” We can hold onto this faith, because it can bear us. It is in our remembering of Christ’s faithfulness, in Christ choosing us in every moment, in the waters of baptism we have shared and in the table we are continually invited to come and eat and remember, it is Christ’s faithfulness that reminds us that it is Christ, whom we should hold on to, because it is Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, who holds on to us.

So what do we do with this faith we hold fast to? We continue to climb, my friends.  In this full assurance and the confidence that may be found in Christ’s faithfulness, we continue to rise up, and stand out in society and culture that shouts for conformity and consumerism, that continues to perpetuate freedoms of ownership over the value of life, that guises injustice in systems named after justice.  The author of Hebrews identifies three specific ways to do this. “Draw near to God,” “Hold fast to the hope we profess,” and “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another.”  Hold on to God, Hold on to the hope of knowing Jesus holds on to us, and hold on to each other. This we can do every day; this we can do with confidence, because in Christ we have a high priest, in Christ, God chooses us, then, now and forever.

It is the hope of our chapel team that we do just that this week.  We hope you will continue to come and meet together here in worship, to draw nearer to God, to hold on to the hope we know in Jesus Christ’s faithfulness, and to encourage one another and provoke goodness.  I pray that this week we might remember the choice Jesus makes in each moment, all three million four hundred and fifty six thousand, from now to graduation and for all of time, that God chooses to love us. And if we are sidetracked by our to-do lists, if we catch ourselves looking down and fearing the consequences, let us be reminded that as we hold on to Jesus Christ and to one another, that we too are being held.  Let it be so, that we may continue to climb with goodness and confidence. A few weeks ago I was watching a movie called Kingdom of God. Despite many of the troubling notions raised by this fictional dramatization of the Crusades, there is a moment when the main character, a recently elevated knight, has to describe his faith, which he holds in contrast to the people he is fighting against. He says, “The prophet (to which he is speaking of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, Peace by upon him), commands to submit, God asks us to decide.”  And so we must, because in Christ, God has already made the decision. So we are invited to do the same, to hold fast to the hope we know in Christ’s faithfulness, and to meet and encourage and provoke one another to embody Christ’s faithfulness. And we do so in confidence knowing there is no risk in it. In his faithfulness, Christ has assumed all of the risk. But the consequences… the consequences of our decisions are high. So hold on, draw near to God by the hope found in Christ’s faithfulness and hold onto each other, as Christ holds on to us. In doing so may we remember all that God has done for us, the enduring faithfulness of Christ Jesus who chooses to love us, and the work of the Holy Spirit which draws us to meet together and to worship the one worthy of our praise.  So hold on my friends, and know that you are held. Amen.