One of the dangers of going to seminary is that you acquire a collection of important sounding seminary words. None of the concepts that these words define are particularly difficult but because they are not in everyday usage, they can give an air of erudition to the seminary graduate that is wholly unwarranted. When I was at Nashotah, we had a professor whose entire preaching style was, to paraphrase the great English Romantic Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, “I am Father Sikes, professor of professors, Look on my words like hermeneutics, ye Mighty, and despair!” If you care, all hermeneutics means is the methods you use when interpreting the Bible. Seminary words can all be a lot of fuss for not much. So, this morning when I use the phrase proof-texting, please don’t get too excited. My usage of the term in no way makes me erudite or even interesting. Proof-texting basically means taking one piece of scripture, devoid of context, and using it to prove whatever it is you want proven. Slaveholders in antebellum America used a lot of proof texting when showing that God smiled on their peculiar institution. It is also how you get snake handling and Will Smith’s Oscar speech. And the amazing thing about proof-texting is that much of the Bible is written in such a way as to avoid it. Meaning that the practitioners of it have to be particularly disingenuous when making their point. Take the passage we have from Philippians today.

The section I want to look at partly says, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.” Someone, say on the extreme end of Protestantism, might take this small passage and do a little proof-testing saying, “People of earth, I declare unto you that God requires nothing of us besides faith.” And if you did not pick up your Bible a lot, you might be persuaded. But if we look at the passages that immediately proceed and follow this exultation of faith, we might not come away so persuaded as to the veracity of our fictional protestant’s account. Just before this passage St. Paul says, “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.” And right after this passage he says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” These things don’t sound like faith at all, at least not in an intellectual sense, but they sound an awful lot like suffering. And just to show you that I went to seminary, in the first instance the word that gets translated as suffering, in the original Greek, is more like forfeit or fined than suffering. But the point is St. Paul is not saying that we just need faith, at least not faith as we currently understand it. We need, to use another seminary term, a little skin in the game. Otherwise, why would St. Paul, in an account where he is justifying his credentials as a Christian, feel compelled to let us know not only of his faith but the way that he has lived?

To fully understand what he is getting at I think we need to have a little discussion about the word faith and how it is often abused these days. The term faith, in modern parlance, has been shrunk to mean something along the lines of the opposite of reason. Faith concerns things that cannot be proven, whereas reason is about the cold hard facts of life. But that is really not what faith is. Faith is really just the belief that things which have not yet happened will happen in a certain way. So, for example, when I got up this morning, I had faith in all sorts of things. I had faith that when I got in the shower, water would come out of the shower head. When I got into my car, I had faith that it would start and when I got to church, I had faith that my keys would open the door. The reason for my faith was mainly because of experience. The shower had always turned on in the past, my key have always worked on the church door and so on. But we have faith in things for a variety of other reasons besides direct experience. For example, when I was up in Victoria at my parent’s place, I was not shocked to see that there were new shades installed. The reason I was not shocked was because my Dad had told me that new shades had been installed. And since my Dad is not in the habit of lying to me about such things, I had complete faith that the place would be as he had described it. So, when Paul talks about his faith, he is talking about all of those things. He is talking about how he believes God will act based on his direct experience, but also his belief in how God will act based on the experiences of others. Faith properly understood is not unreasonable, but is highly reasonable. And I think such an understanding gets us closer to seeing why St. Paul talks about faith and action in the same breath. After all, when I woke up this morning, I did not simply think happy thoughts about water coming out of the shower, rather I lived my faith by turning the knob and getting in the shower. Similarly, when we have faith in God this translates into us actually doing something right here and right now. Because faith that is not lived is not really faith. And as Paul points out by talking about his suffering, sometimes our faith in God will not lead to the most pleasant of circumstances. But our faith tells us that it is the right thing to do. Because we believe, as Paul tells us, “Somehow [we] may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Our faith is taking us somewhere. It is taking us to be with God forever.

This is a really stupid example, but think for a moment about the heater in your car. On a cold day when you get in your car and turn the heat on what happens? Generally speaking, for the first few moments, the fan blows out cold air. That is, the heater makes things cooler. And yet we still turn on the heater. And we do this because we have faith that it will eventually warm up and hot air will start blowing. We are willing to get a little colder because we know that ultimately, we will get warmer. That is sort of what Paul is talking about. He has faith in God. This faith leads him to do certain things, but sometimes, in the short term, his life might actually get worse. Now please don’t take this to mean that we are only following God when our life is miserable. Rather what it means is that when our faith is focused on God there may be short term inconveniences but we ultimately know that these will not last and that we will be with God forever.

We are in our final Sunday of the numbered Sundays of Lent. Next week is Palm Sunday and then it is Easter. We of course know how the story ends, but for a thought experiment, let’s put that aside. Think of the faith that it must have taken on Calvary to believe that all would be well. That while Christ was hanging on the cross that victory would come. And then take a moment to think what a faith like that would look like in the world. A faith that in the darkest hour firmly believes that it will be alright. It would not be a faith of lying in bed and thinking happy thoughts but would be an active and consuming faith. It would be a faith that was out in the world announcing in word and deed that God’s power will ultimately win the day so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.