

Looking Back: What can we learn from the Past?
Psalm 27, Hebrews 11, selected verses
Rev. Lynell M. Caudillo
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Our elders are reading a book by Thom Rainer, with the provocative title: Autopsy of a Deceased Church, and twelve ways to keep yours alive.

During May and June, I'll be addressing some of the themes and biblical passages from this book. I also ask you to be making Calvary's future health a matter of prayer. Each week at the conclusion of our service, we will pray a prayer of commitment that is printed at the end of the order of worship. With minor modification, these are taken from Rainer's book. They require of each one of us a commitment not only to pray deeply, but also to think deeply, and then to act. Please pray for our elders as we seek God's guidance in season of our life together.

Read Hebrews 11: 1-3, 6, 8-16

11 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for.

³By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

[Then the author of Hebrews begins naming those in the Faith Hall of Fame...Abel, Noah, Enoch, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab and so many more that there is not time nor space to recount them all.]

⁶And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁸By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs

with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she^[b] considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

What is faith?

All these people had it.

Is it a set of doctrinal beliefs? Hmm, yes and no. This is not to say that the *content* of what we believe is not unimportant. Quite the contrary. What we believe is very important. However, *what we believe* informs/influences/dictates ACTION, *how we live/ behave*, what we DO.

Is faith trust in a personal God? Yes.

Faith is real, but intangible. Like atmosphere/air...gravity. Like the love of a spouse or friend. We experience it. But we can't see it. We can see the effects of it. We know it is real.

Faith is what energized and informed these “Faith Hall of Famers”. It motivated them to act/live in particular ways. What is interesting is that the author of Hebrews indicates that without exception, all of them died without fully realizing or receiving the promised outcome of their faith, during their earthly lifetime.

Let's take a brief look at Abraham.

About 4,000 years ago a family of nomads was residing in Ur of the Chaldeans—perhaps in the vicinity of present day south eastern Iraq, and they settled in Haran, near Turkey's border with Syria. While there the family patriarch died. His son Abraham began to hear a voice. Abraham

believed that he was being called by God to leave his homeland and all that was familiar, in order to go to a new land that God would show him.

Abraham's obedience to the call of God to "go", changed history as we know it. He set out in faith, not knowing *where* he was going -- no GPS or Google maps after all! No triple A "trip-tic" or reservations called ahead!

Lock, stock, and barrel, Abraham packed up all he had and hit the road. He did not even grasp *why* he was going except that *he felt compelled to obey* the One who called him.

Now I don't know about you, but I like to plan ahead. I like to plan the itinerary, figure out the mileage for each day, make reservations, and so on. None of this "follow your heart" stuff for me. But that is in essence what Abraham did! He acted without any guarantees, forging ahead on faith.

Now this trip was more than a mere change of geography or scenery. In leaving Haran, Abraham was leaving behind everything familiar: custom, comfort, family, friends—his entire known world—in exchange for the totally unknown—and all of this due to faith in a largely unknown and untried God.

How many of us would do the same? A show of hands? That's what I thought! *But really, if you were convinced that God was calling you...would you trust God enough to follow into the unknown? (I can tell most of you are NOT risk-takers...!)*

The story of Abraham is the story of how God used one imperfect human being, and his wife Sarah, another imperfect human being—to bless the entire world. (We saw this during Advent as we considered the genealogy of Jesus! The Savior of the world was related to Abraham and Sarah!) God promised this couple who—were well past their child bearing age—and already collecting social security—that they would not only have a baby, but that their offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the nighttime sky, and that through them, the entire world would be blessed!

Furthermore, in order to obey God, Abraham had to leave behind any narrow-minded, limited vision of the world. He had to let go of his fear of the unknown, as well as his fear of others he considered strange or different. He had to admit his lack of control, and his fear of powerlessness and embrace the promise of God. No guarantees. *Wow. Either that is crazy or that is courageous. He let go of fear to embrace faith!*

Perhaps that is because faith is a process rather than a possession.

Faith is a journey rather than a destination.

Faith is trust in the unseen, but very real relationship with the living God.

Memory is integral to human life. The longer we live, the more memories we accumulate. And so in this chapter, the author of Hebrews looks back, recalling people and events that were pivotal in the communal life of Israel.

More to the point, these particular people and events are recounted because of their walk of faith...their response to the promises of God.

During this 125th Anniversary year for Calvary, we too have done some reminiscing. We have remembered former pastors, members, and missionaries. We have recalled God's faithfulness to this congregation from generation to generation over the course of 125 years. That is remarkable and certainly something to celebrate!

Calvary could well have its own Faith Hall of Fame—and many of you would be better than I, at naming those who have gone before. Last month while on study leave, I recently attended the West Coast Presby. Pastor's Conference. Also, there were Rev. Ron and Nancy Oldencamp, former Interim pastor here, and Rev. Steve Clark, a former associate here. He and his wife Jenny serve two different churches about 4 miles apart in Pennsylvania now. All of these folks send their warmest greetings to you.

There is value in looking back...in appreciating how God brought gifted pastors and people to lead this church in its mission and ministry over many years, and in giving thanks for lessons learned and lives changed.

But there is some danger in looking back.

...the danger of romanticizing "the good ole' days"...of looking back through rose-colored glasses, or exercising selective memory, and forgetting some hard and difficult times in Calvary's past. Sadly, over the years more than one pastor engaged in sexual misconduct which tore destructively at the fabric of this church family and may well have caused some to experience a crisis in their own faith journey.

Furthermore, in facing some challenges head on and together, guided by both the Word and the Spirit, Calvary has weathered some denominational issues with grace and integrity.

Looking back, reminds us of the value of relationships, and of Koinonia, the deep sense of God-created-community. Because one's faith may wax and wane in strength, God calls us into the body, so that if one is experiencing a season of weakness, struggle, or doubt, another who is in a season of strength, can walk alongside and vice versa.

To be clear, doubt is not a lack of faith.

Rather, according to Frederick Buechner, “doubt is the ‘ants in the pants’ of faith”! Doubt is *not* to be *discouraged*, but *encouraged*. Doubt is that which can drive us deeper into God’s word, deeper into the arms of God. Doubt can spur us on in a spiritual journey of discovery!

One more thing. These “saints” or Hebrews Hall of Famers? They were no different than you or me. They were ordinary people. They did not think of themselves as Hall of Famers. They trusted and obeyed an extraordinary God!

When Rob and I were in seminary we were invited to the home of Carl and Ruth Soltz. Carl was a retired pastor, doing interm work at the church where we were seminary interns. They lived at a Presbyterian retirement facility and Carol took great pride in giving us a tour. As we were crossing the grass, he hailed a neighbor.

“Joe, I want you to meet my friends.” Turning to us, Carl explained, “Joe was a professor of Church History.”

Joe politely interrupted: “No, I taught Christian Education. *I made Church History!*”

Friends, you and I are making church history! We, like Carl and Joe and so many others, are ordinary, imperfect people who struggle with sin, who love God, our spouses and kids and do our best to make good choices. Ordinary, imperfect people, sinners all—who have experienced the grace and blessing of God and do our feeble best to try to share and articulate our faith with our co-workers and neighbors. All of these Hebrews 11-Hall of Famers were ordinary people, who loved and served an extraordinary God, just as we do!

To be clear—you *future* Hall of Famers of the Faith—it does *not* mean you pitched or bowled a perfect game. It does *not* mean that you never made a mistake, a poor choice, or never got a parking or speeding ticket. Nope. It means that you and I are doing our best to live moment by moment, as God’s own people, “faithing” each and every day through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Because “faith is better understood as a verb than a noun.”* That means what we believe in our heads and hearts is put into action. “Faithing”. (I do not have a lisp, that is faith+ing!) Like walk+ing or talk+ing. Faith+ing is something we DO *because* of what we Believe. (*Frederick Buechner)

Faith and action are synonymous!

At the April meeting of Seattle presbytery, it was startling to me, to learn that the Presbyterian church on Capitol Hill was closing its doors. They have a good facility in a great location. They worked hard at engaging folks in their neighborhood. They closed not for lack of members or finances, but for lack of 'critical mass', of those willing and able to provide leadership.

Reading this book has also raised some questions about the health of our church. Please hear me. Calvary is generally a healthy church today. However, there are some symptoms that indicate we could be facing some *more* serious issues IF we don't seriously pray and take a good, prayerful look at who we are and the community to which God has placed us within. God may require us to make some difficult but life-giving changes that will put us on a path toward greater health and sustainability.

It reminds me of Peanuts comic strip in which Lucy is sitting in her psychiatrist booth. This day the doctor is "in" sign is on display. Charlie Brown asks her: "Do you think I can ever become a mature and well-adjusted person?"

Lucy replies: "For a question like that, I have to be paid in advance."

"In advance?! Why?" he asks incredulously.

"Because," Lucy says, "I don't think you're going to like the answer!"

Isn't that true? Sometimes we don't like to hear what the doctor has to say, or what our friend or spouse has to say to us. Sometimes we don't want to take a clear, open-eyed look at reality because it can be painful. We don't want to face what we see.

The truth must be recognized and reckoned with, even if, as Lucy says, we don't think we're going to like it!

However, know this: Jesus told Peter, the Church will never die. In Matthew 18:16 Jesus said:

"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock (your faith and the faith of others like you) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Friends: We have some "faithing" to do. We have some listening to do. You and I—Future Faith Hall of Famers—we have some praying to do!

May God guide us as together, you and I, "make church history"!

Join me in prayer.