

Hebrews 11:1-2, 11:35-12:3

It was quite a list, wasn't it? A list of different ways God's people have been persecuted. No names are mentioned in that list, but maybe we think of people like this: Elijah had to flee into the wilderness because his life was in danger. Jeremiah was beaten and put into stocks, and later was thrown into a cistern (when I'm going through a rough day, I try to remember that...well, at least no one has thrown me into a cistern yet). Zechariah was attacked in the Temple courtyard and stoned to death. Isaiah, according to the tradition at least, was sawed into two. And these are just a few examples of what our lesson today talks about. People willing to face extreme persecution, embarrassment, and even death because they had something better in Christ.

There is a misconception among many who practice Christianity in America that the life of a Christian (if he or she is being faithful) will be marked by earthly success and glory. Christians will be prosperous, Christians will get rich, Christians won't really struggle with sin anymore, Christians will be so blessed from an earthly point of view that life will mostly be great and wonderful. I once saw a church sign that had this message on it: "We're too blessed to be stressed." A Christian can understand a message like that correctly, but it certainly gives the impression that if you are a follower of Jesus, life will be easy, life won't be stressful. Part of that has come from the fact that we live in a very prosperous and rich country, and as Christians, we haven't faced the same type of persecution that other Christians have faced.

But compare that to what our lesson says has happened to some believers: Mocked. Whipped. Imprisoned. Stoned. Sawed into two. Or think of what Jesus says in the gospel lesson for today: **"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).**

You might be thinking, "Ok, but I've never experienced any of those things that the writer to the Hebrews mentioned – I've never been thrown into prison. No one has ever tried to kill me because of my faith. I've never had to make my home in a cave or in a hole in the ground. The most major cross I've had to bear is not having donuts and coffee at church :)" Let's thank the Lord for that and for the fact that the persecution we may have faced in our lives hasn't been as extreme as what other Christians have or are currently facing. We shouldn't feel bad for that.

Yet, a question I want each one of us to think about today is this: Am I too comfortable in this world? Am I too influenced by the world? Do I get worked up when the church AC isn't working more than when fellow brothers and sisters in Christ have drifted away from the Lord? Do I get more worked up about the fact that my neighbor might not mow their lawn in a timely fashion more than the fact that I have no idea where they stand in a relationship with Jesus? Do I find myself living my faith here at church for an hour or two a week but then when I'm at home, when I'm at work, when I'm out with friends, my faith is hardly visible? Do I find that people know me more by my political affiliation or my favorite sports team or the funny memes I share on Facebook instead of my faith in the Savior?

Jesus says that following him, trusting in him, will naturally lead to denying yourself and taking up your cross. Those are incredibly difficult things to do, perhaps even more so as we live in a culture that tells us to embrace yourself and your sinful nature and to eat, drink, and be merry. Following Jesus means that we struggle against our sinful nature, we fight against our sinful nature, and we're willing to endure persecution in this world because of our faith.

Why? Why does Jesus make fighting against sin and willingness to suffer because of our faith a mark of discipleship? Why is the Christian life marked not by earthly success and glory but by sorrow, loss, and struggling?

Because Jesus loves you. Because Jesus would rather have you with him in heaven than for you to have a comfortable, easy life here on earth. Because Jesus would rather have you hand over to him all your sin, all your doubts, all your worries than for those things to entangle you and lead you away from him. Comfort can easily lead to complacency when it comes to our faith. At times, Jesus wants you to be uncomfortable. He wants you to be uncomfortable when it comes to your sin. He wants you to be uncomfortable when you think about those who don't know him. He wants you to be uncomfortable as you live your faith in this sinful world because in those moments when you're uncomfortable all we can do is to hold onto him and his grace.

What are you struggling with right now? What sin are you struggling with? What problems are filling your life? You know the best thing you can do? It's to hand them over to Jesus. Daily. One of the blessings he gives us is other believers. Everyone of you is struggling in some way. Maybe you're struggling with some sort of addiction. Maybe you're struggling with the sin of gossip. Maybe you're struggling with fear and worry. Maybe you're struggling with arrogance and pride. Maybe you're struggling with spiritual apathy. You know what Jesus wants you to do with those things. Bring them to him. And to know there are fellow Christians in your life who care about you and love you. That you don't need to be scared or nervous in reaching out to one of pastors here or a fellow Christian you trust. There's no shame in talking to someone because we're all struggling in some way and Jesus wants us to receive grace and help.

Because the solution to these struggles isn't for us simply to be inspired by these heroes of faith, we've looked at this summer and say I've got to do better. The solution isn't to look inside of ourselves (as Pastor Olson said last week) and find the strength there to do better. What does our lesson say? After spending a whole chapter on talking about people who lived by faith, what's the conclusion?

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Fix your eyes on Jesus!

You and I have been blessed in a way unlike these Old Testament believers that we've talked about all summer long. Even though they lived by faith and certainly received the blessings of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Jesus, we see the complete picture. We see how God made good on his promise to send a Savior in this world. We've heard Jesus say things like this: "Come to me all, all who you are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." "Father, forgive them they know not what they are doing." We see Jesus leave the comfort of heaven and trade it for the sorrows of this world. We see him denying ease and comfort so that we would be saved and forgiven. He was rejected so that we would be accepted. He was humbled so that we would be lifted up. He died so that we would have life. "For the joy set before him" he did all that. Because he had you on his heart and on his mind. Because he loves you.

And because he loves you, he says this: "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." View these words not as someone who hates you and wants your life to be miserable...view them as someone who loves you, who joyfully went to the cross for you, who first and foremost wants you to be with him in heaven. He pleads with us to deny our sinful nature, to carry our crosses, and follow him. Not because it's earning us anything, but because when we do that, when we struggle against sin, when we confess our sins to one another, when we bear our crosses, when we follow Jesus, it leads us to keep our eyes on him, the author and perfecter of our faith. When the comfort of this life gets taken away, that's when we find our comfort and our rest in Christ alone.

The longer we live in this world, the more we see that. Our sinful nature wants us to grab on to this world and hold on to it tightly. And so, what does Jesus do? He uses the struggles that we endure. He uses the persecution that we face. He uses the sorrows of this world, and one by one he pries our fingers off this world. He places our hands on him and his grace. He takes our eyes off this world and refocuses them on our heavenly home. He promises that as you live by faith, the struggle, the hurt and the hardship, and the suffering you face is nothing compared to the glory of your heavenly home.

Our lesson says: **God had planned something better for us.** Remember that when we struggle against sin. Remember that when the guilt of your sin weighs you down. Remember that when you face hardship and difficulty in this world. God has planned something better for you. And it's not necessarily a better job, a more comfortable life, or more money. He's planned and given you through faith a perfect future and a perfect home in heaven. So, keep your eyes on Jesus, our real hero and our real Savior. Amen.

