

*By Faith*

August 14, 2016 Hebrews 11:29-12:2

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When my children were growing up we made an annual pilgrimage to New Hampshire for two weeks every summer. It was a long long haul in the car; 18 hours to be exact. But it got us where we wanted to be. One year, my folks offered to fly my son and I out while they drove the other two kids. I couldn't wait. Just think, we would make that 18 hour trip in a fraction of the time. Two hours to be exact!

Well, my joy was soon diminished as our first flight was greatly delayed, we missed the next flight, and spent way too much time on a tarmac somewhere that was not New Hampshire! When the entire 'quick' trip was added up, it took us more than 13 hours to get to our destination. I was no longer so sure that traveling by plane was my preferred method!

I think this is somewhat similar to what today's writer of Hebrews is talking about. How do you want to make your journey through life? By plane, by car.....by faith? Today's reading from the book of Hebrews is the conclusion of what is often referred to as the "roll call of heroes of faith." The chapter begins with Abel and moves on through the patriarchs to the conclusion of the list we hear today. Each of these heroes of Scripture is introduced with the phrase "by faith"....by faith Abel offered to God..., by faith Noah built an ark..., by faith Abraham obeyed and set out, not knowing where he was headed. And so the list continues. We hear about Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses. And then today's reading picks up with the whole people of Israel, who BY FAITH passed through the Red Sea. As the list grows, the writer tells us that there really isn't even time to tell of all, who BY FAITH, acted on behalf of God, for their numbers are so great.

And up to this point, perhaps the roll call of heroes is making some sense. These are indeed the heroes of the Bible. These are the stories that would make Marvel comics sell like hot cakes. Noah who saves every species on the earth by his obedience to an act that screams utter craziness. Sarah and Abraham who start nations through the birth of Isaac in their ancient and barren age. Joseph who rescues Egypt from one of the worst famines by listening to his dreams. And of course that Cecile B. DeMille historical moment of the parting of a sea so the Israelites could walk their way out of slavery! Yes, these are indeed the stories of heroes. The stories we all wonder "hmmm....could there ever be walls of Jericho in MY life?"

But just when the list is starting to make sense, yes....by faith these illustrious characters made history... well then the list starts to take what feels like a dangerous turn. Up to now being a hero for God seemed like a great idea; get your name in the BIG book and be remembered as the one who saw the face of God and lived, or killed a giant with a sling shot. But now those on the list don't even get names. They are identified merely as "others" and their tales leave something to be desired. These heroes are tortured, suffer mocking and flogging, are imprisoned for....or by....their faith. They are stoned to death, sawed in two, persecuted and tormented. Oh sure, the writer adds that "the world was not worthy of them" but I'm not so sure that makes everything all right, makes them heroes like the first bunch. But these ARE the heroes of the faith as well, the early martyrs of the church, tortured for their faith. These are the stories of those whose faith and courage kept them on the path of God, living by faith, despite the human cost.

So what is up here? What do we make of the first section of heroes who got miraculous, magnificent events associated with THEIR faith and these poor "others" who suffered for their faith? Exactly what IS this faith stuff all about? What purpose does it serve? It seems like "by faith" you may do marvelous acts for God, or "by faith" you may end up isolated and struggling

against life. Perhaps that is exactly what Hebrews is trying to help us see and understand. Faith is not some guarantee that you will bear stories of great and amazing events in your life. But neither is faith an inoculation against the struggles and dangers of life. While God certainly acts through the lives of the faithful, faith is no promise of a life of bliss. We may think our faith will bring us peace or joy or contentment or security. And it does but not in the human ways we usually think of them. Peace, joy, contentment and security do not mean the absence of pain, suffering, confusion or strife. But the writer of Hebrews is sharing with us that in the midst of pain and suffering, BY FAITH, we can find peace and security, and perhaps a whole lot more! If we choose to make the journey through life BY FAITH, we may not be sure of the journey itself....turbulence and delays included....but we CAN be sure of how we will handle that turbulence.

Several years ago I found myself weeping in the car on Christmas Eve. I was alone and had thousands of things to get done for the holiday. But life had been very tough, too tough, for too long. I was worn out and tired of the constant struggle life seemed to present. And I was tired of living by faith, but not sensing any relief. What was my faith really doing for me, I wondered? How was it helping me at all? I was in the eye of the storm and having difficulty seeing clearly. I cried for hours that day, but with no answers, no better understanding of why I clung to my faith. Over the next few weeks I wrestled daily with this dilemma. I will tell you I wanted to ditch my faith; after all, I wasn't building any arks or hiding any spies like Rahab. And I was tired of being like those "others" ...suffering and in emotional pain on a daily basis. And then God let me understand that my faith would probably NEVER change the circumstances surrounding my life. But my faith COULD change ME. It was about how I would meet each day of strife. It was about knowing I was not alone in this battle. It was about persevering, because one day it WOULD be well. Maybe not in my lifetime, but one day all would be well in God's plan. And by living by faith, I could live in that security. And living in that security made it easier for me to face the daily battle.

In fact, the word for faith in the Old Testament is most often associated with truth, trustworthiness and security. To have faith in God is to know God to be true, to have trust in or reliance upon God. This Hebrew notion of faith points to a confidence in someone or something else; God is in control, God is our security, our solid, firm foundation. But it also includes an understanding of fidelity; God is true to us always. God is a constant we can rely on always. And because of that fidelity, our faith gives way to hope. Now, this is not the average hope we may speak about that always contains an element of uncertainty, like hoping to land a job or even win the lottery. And certainly this hope is not about bringing about what we want our desire. This hope is one of an expectation of good, of a confidence in God. This hope is one that knows at the end of God's day, all will indeed be well. Indeed, today's writer even says at one point that our heroes "received God's promises" and later that "none of them received what God had promised." So the promise is there, that we receive now. But the realization of that promise is for a later time, and that is where our hope lies. God's promise through Christ is NOT for this lifetime, no matter what life brings, good or bad! St. Augustine, who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, said it well: "Faith is believing what you do not see. The reward of faith is seeing what you have believed." Our hope, our security, is in knowing that one day we WILL see what we believe. We WILL live out God's promises to us. Our faith is a guarantee of that hope. For the God that loves us like no other is true to us in all situations, and if that isn't cause for hope, I don't know what is!

Where this faith leads us in times of distress is to places of hope. Indeed, the energy of faith results in hope, not despair. For us as Christians, we have reason to hope through all of life's trials, because we live by faith in the God of true security. And that hope is what can

indeed bring peace and security during times of suffering and pain. So we live BY FAITH, we make our journey through life BY FAITH. And not because this faith guarantees a pain-free existence, but because this faith guarantees hope. We can certainly choose to travel the journey of life by some other means, not by faith. But I would much prefer to live in hope than despair or doubt. I would much prefer to live BY FAITH that knows God is present with us in every moment of every day, whether that day brings great joy or great suffering. God is there. And so we stick to our journey by faith, as today's writer asks us to do....to persevere no matter what.

In all of my reflections upon this reading I kept thinking about a young friend of mine. Andy has a form of autism that allows him to function very well in today's world. His autism though, keeps him in a pretty literal place in life. He can be pretty black and white, if you know what I mean! Andy was a regular in Special Olympics tennis in high school. In fact, he was more than a regular, he went to Hilton Head Island for the national championships of Special Olympics tennis. For so many of us, and our kids, sports are about winning. We are continually striving to better our swing, our back hand, our 3 point shot. The fun is often in the competition and the idea that THIS time I just might break that time record or catch the winning touchdown.

But I always got the sense from Andy that tennis was something different for him. So I called him and asked him to tell me about his tennis, how did he start playing, why does he play, what keeps him sticking with the game. It was a great conversation and in so many ways echoed the heroes of our Hebrews text today. He started playing because his dad told him to! God told Noah to build an ark, Andy's dad told him to play tennis. He did not know why he kept playing. I expected to hear that tennis was fun...but no, it is just something he does. Sort of like our faith heroes, they kept at it despite the odds or human reason. So I asked him about winning. Well yes, he has won a gold medal and a silver. What happens when you don't win a medal, I asked him. Well, then you get a ribbon. Hmmm...do you feel any differently when you don't get a medal, I asked him. He thought for a minute, nope, he answered. So like our faith heroes, Andy sees the promise of a gold medal, but also easily realizes he may not always get that medal. But that is ok with him. His faith is in the direction his parents set for him, and in the constancy of the game of tennis. So then I asked him if it was ok if I shared his story. And he said he thought that would be ok....but then he added, and I quote "just be sure to tell them it's not about winning or losing."

Ok, Andy, I will share that and try to remember it myself. It's not about parting seas, or bringing down walls, or getting your name in the BIG book. It's about sticking with God no matter what, because of who God will help us to be. It's about living by faith. Living by faith is living in the constant hope of God, no matter the turbulence that swirls around our lives. Living by faith may mean a gold medal sometimes, but it just as easily means a ribbon ... or even less. Getting to New Hampshire by car or by plane or even by train makes for very different trips, some more pleasant than others. But if I journey by faith in every case, I can be assured the security of God with me, and the constant hope in the one who loves us beyond our understanding. Amen.