

Sept 17, 2017

Hebrews 11:1-2 through 12:1-3

“Be in the Middle”

Rev. Pat Weatherwax

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith we know the stories about...Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, The prophets, The weak who became strong, Those who faced jeers, The ones the world treats badly, Those commended for their faith...

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. Hebrews 11:1-2 through 12:1-3 NRSV

RE-INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

If you have been around Battle Creek First Pres all of 2017 you may remember that you are helping me prove that it IS possible to keep a New Year's resolution. My resolution back on January first was to study the Bible book we call Hebrews. Here it is, mid-September, and I'm still plugging away! Proves that if you set an attainable goal and plan it out with a group of witnesses, you are more likely to reach it. We have one more sermon from Hebrews 12 scheduled in November, in the middle of Stewardship season. Hebrews 13 has a lot of worship phrases that we've use throughout the year, so ta-dah! We've almost done it.

Hebrews was probably not a letter like a lot of the other books of the New Testament, but rather a sermon transcript or manuscript sent to a young Christian community that was discouraged. It reads like a sermon and these chapters, 11 and 12 are the grand conclusion. Drum roll please! It's the main emphasis, now!

My favorite Hebrews *Interpretation Commentary* points this out about the way chapter 11, which is the big climax of the speech begins with its definition of faith. Saying faith is

‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’ Systematic theologians quite rightly point out that this statement is incomplete. Faith, as a biblical theological concept, is large, round, and complex, and the Preacher’s description encompasses but a few degrees of its circumference. But the Preacher is not writing a dogmatics. He is preaching a sermon, and he crafts a working definition of faith that will serve his immediate sermonic goals.”

In other words, you do not want your preacher to fully explain in depth every theological concept every time in every sermon. A few of you would might like that, I can name who. Most would not. So as a good sermon would, Hebrews, especially here, is pushing hard to make the point as simply as possible. Faith is what we believe God can do without requiring proof that God will do it.

THE OT SS LESSONS

And the preacher to the Hebrews preaches it! My seminary preaching professor made a big deal that we should use a lot of scripture references when we preach, to support our points. The writer of Hebrews had the same kind of professor, Almost every one of the Old Testament stories that we learn to teach us about God and a life of faith are included in the Hebrews 11 list of examples. All the main ones, the patriarchs are all there, even some of the important women. You heard the names when I read them earlier. Then there’s Barak, hmm, So you know not Obama, I had to look that one up. Jephthah, I had escaped my memory, but was memorable when read. It’s one that’s definitely **not** in our Children’s Storybooks.

Many of you know these stories of faith from the Old Testament, but maybe not all of them. It’s supposed to be hot and maybe even stormy today. Get a concordance and an easy to read translation of the Bible that includes the Old Testament and look up any of these “by faith” accounts that you don’t know. Or get started on them if it seem like a daunting task. And ponder the words of Hebrews 11 about actions taken in faith, deeds done that might not make sense except that it seemed God-directed. People did what they did because God spoke to them directly or indirectly. And they acted in faith. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.(11:1) Maybe God wants you to spend more time in Bible study or Christian service and fellowship. There are all sorts of ways around here to do that.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE

Notice there are verses of Hebrews 11 that talk about later generations, including you and our generations! This isn't only about those from 3000 years ago. When I think about the people I know that are Christ-followers, this is what I think. Just like the Old Testament people mentioned in Hebrews 11, our generation is too, like in:

v:13 "all of these people continued living with faith until they died".

v:34b "some who were weak were made strong!"

v:36 "some were laughed at, beaten up"

v: 38 "the world was not worthy of some people"

There are people today that do amazing things, because they are lead by God. There are people in this room that do amazing things because they lead by God.

COMMENDED FOR THEIR FAITH

And especially 11:39 talks about you and your generation and all people of faith before you: "they were commended for their faith". Are the stories people remember and tell about you going to be ones that commend you for your faith? Last week Pastor Jeff reminded us of this church's core values. They're in the bulletin. Our presbytery (our regional group of 64 presbyterian churches) has recently defined our core values saying: "we seek God's way of *grace and justice through*: inclusion, formation and inspiration." What are your personal core values? Are they obvious to the people around you? Are you leading by example? What stories do you tell or do others tell about what's important to you? Does it point toward an honest, faithful life of trusting God? **Will** they know you're a Christian, by your love?

My mom used to like to talk about the time as a young woman in 1944 that she took her chubby toddler son, my oldest brother, on a bus from Kalamazoo to Tallahassee Florida, to see her husband before he was deployed to the European Theater. The baby threw and broke his last glass bottle. Of course there were only cloth diapers to deal with in those days. She also dealt with her constant motion sickness and my brother's toddler curiosity. What did I learn from that? That a woman with faith and a plan and love can do just about anything she sets her mind to. I am here today, at least in part because that young mom taught that God would help manage a tough journey.

This passage from Hebrews 11 is often labeled "Generations of Faith". Who in your past has influenced you to be here today? Maybe not even a family member? A minute is a long time for silence in church. I'd like to give you one minute to remember a story of someone being a positive example for you, like

my mom was for me. Think about the example of a person, besides Jesus, you'd like to follow. Time out.

COMMENDATION

If you have the opportunity today, share the story you just considered with someone else. If you can, share it with the person who inspires you to live by faith. If they have already gone to God, share the story with someone who loved them, with a call or note. Commend them, just as God did: "well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt 23:25). That's the verse the sons with plenty to praise their fathers ask for when arranging their funeral services. And think about what path you are choosing. Are you like these people in the middle of Hebrews 11? Be in the middle.

I know stories and examples that are hard to forget, that go the other way, too. Times I am startled by good people who enjoy "beating the system" or who pick giant profits over helping people. Most of the time when I am preparing for funerals families love to share stories. But sometimes adult children sit with lips tight and arms crossed and are not able to find any way to honestly eulogize their dead parent.

We all make mistakes. We frequently find ourselves in circumstances where we compound the negative. Or we can try to turn things around, redeem the situation. When we've built walls it becomes hard to take them down neatly and carefully and gently. So we are constantly "looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. "

You really do live in a world of free choice. To be sure, lots of things happen that are out of your control, but there are things that we can choose. Choose to be one of those who live in the middle of Hebrews 11; live by faith. We are saved by the work of God through the sacrifice of Jesus, not by these good works of ours. Don't get this confused! Being a good person isn't the point. Honoring God and living a life that pleases God and makes our world better, not worse is the goal for all who follow in the way of righteousness. By grace you are saved through faith. Thanks be to God.