

A Cheering Crowd

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³² And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

^{12:1} 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.

It is not easy being a Christian today. Defining ourselves by our beliefs and faith can be challenging socially. Friends may not understand. Relatives may look with concern. Colleagues may ask why we are willing to give up some of the earthly goods for the sake of something or someone that is difficult to see or experience.

We see a lot of discouragement within our churches today. Mainline Protestant attendance continues to decline. We remember just a few years ago when there were families with children and we made plans for Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, youth events and evangelistic programs. Now we look around and even our everyday challenges can be discouraging.

We are not alone, today's Christians are not so different from those who have gone before us. The members of the early church also struggled with discouragement.

What has helped God's people deal with discouragement since the beginning is the knowledge that we are not alone. We follow in the footsteps of people from the earliest biblical times who were unsure of what the future held for them. We follow in the footsteps of saints who along the way chose to trust God anyway. We follow a God who does not abandon us in times of trouble. When we follow the path of staying focused on Jesus Christ our savior, we are able to see the joy in life despite the suffering.

This was the issue faced by the author of the book of Hebrews. The social context of the epistle to the Hebrews was that Jewish Christians were discouraged and demoralized. They felt excluded from the mainstream of society and felt political pressure from the Jewish religious establishment.

Our scripture sets forth a vision for the church: while living the faithful life has always been a challenge, God's people can trust in their king. The writer's purpose was to encourage the Jewish Christian community to stay faithful to God in the face of the challenges of life.

According to the writer, faith allows people to see beyond what is right in front of them, their daily problems, to see what God is doing in their midst, to see what God has done throughout the ages, and to see the future joy God has in store for us.

The writer of Hebrews was writing to a people who were well versed in the Old Testament, so he examined three examples of individuals for starters in the Hebrew Bible who showed great faith in God (11:29-31). He reminded his readers of the Israelites, who by faith passed through the Red Sea under Moses' leadership. We know the story of how God miraculously allowed them to go through as on dry land, but when the Egyptian army attempted to follow them, they were destroyed! It was by faith that God miraculously allowed the Israelites to walk around the city of Jericho for seven days and by following God's instructions the walls fell down! It was by faith that Rahab, the prostitute, saved the lives of the Israelite spies and as a reward God saved the lives of her whole family! The writer contrasts these examples with others who did not have such faith. The Israelites who believed walked through the sea, captured Jericho, and

survived. Those who were disobedient drowned, were destroyed, perished. The writer wants us to understand that God calls us to faith, and that there are consequences of disbelief.

The letter to the Hebrews included additional examples from the Old Testament: Gideon, the timid military leader who God empowered to save the Israelites from the Midianites with only 300 soldiers armed by trumpets and water jars; Samson, who God gave superhuman strength to save the Israelites from the Philistines; Samuel, whom God made the religious leader and counselor to the first two kings of Israel; and others who showed great faith in God (11:32-38). These are both ordinary and extraordinary figures from Israel's history, all of whom had both great faith, but also experienced times of great doubt and fear! These stories all lead to the same conclusion: that our faith will lead to something joyful in time, even if we cannot now foresee it. As the author of Hebrews puts it, "they were commended for their faith, (they) did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect" (11:39-40).

God wants us to depend on God for our salvation. Faith in our passage is not about our trusting ourselves. Trust is outwardly focused. We trust the God who stayed true to our ancestors in faith and will stay true to us.

Our scripture challenges us to endure suffering and to look to Jesus, who endured the cross and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. This is not a call to martyrdom (to give up our lives), but to endurance. The author writes that Jesus endured the cross and endured suffering for "the joy that was set before him" (12:2).

Others will ask: Why should we have optimism about our future? Or do we have optimism about the future? Those are important questions. Our congregation has much to look forward to and must keep looking forward. I know we look around with fear, but God inspired some faithful Flint residents to establish a congregation for the worship and glory of God. There came a time when some saw a different vision and established another congregation. Years later, the two congregations reunited to serve

God and the community as one congregation again. We look around with our natural eyes and see we are small. However, when we look through eyes of faith, we realize God had left us here to share the love of Jesus Christ and help each other along life's journey. We do well to focus on the idea that we have realistic faith for our future because of what God has done in the past. The Hebrew writer wants to remind us that we are not the first to struggle with doubts and discouragement, but he also reminds us of many Old Testament individuals who demonstrated great faith in times of discouragement!

This scripture encourages us to be bold and faithful in our religious practice of prayer and worship. It focuses our lives on staying faithful to the God who is faithful to us. Many in the early church were ready to turn their back on God and return to the more comfortable life of the prevailing Jewish religion. The writer encourages God's people to trust God for the future, rather than relying on the past. We are to be people who are forward looking because it is Jesus Christ who holds the future of God's people. Those in the Hebrew Bible who were forward looking and trusted God, even if they could not see where God was leading, received their reward.

When we are discouraged, remember Christ on the cross was not consumed with the pain of the moment, as great as it was, but kept an eye on the joy that would come when he went to heaven and was seated with the Father. In the same way, we are to look to Jesus Christ, staying in tune with what is going on around us and not ignoring the pain we and others are feeling. However, as Christ looked to heaven, we look to Christ. We are called to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus."

The writer's instructions remind us of the athletic disciplines of track and field. He tells us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. I think I have mentioned before that I know an Olympic athlete, and my brother-in-law, Rev. Johnson is a Senior Olympian. They perform before other in an arena. The writer tells us to perform our race of faith surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Remember when you are discouraged in your

faith walk: the people of Israel who saw no relief from their enemies, whether at the Red Sea, or taking the city of Jericho, or defeating the Midianites or the Philistines, they are cheering us on. When we are discouraged by our small number, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets are cheering us on! When we are feeling hopeless, each person who had been a member of this congregation who has gone to be with the Lord is cheering us on! When we are discouraged, Jesus is cheering us on! 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, 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! Jesus is a superior prophet to those who came before, and he is our biggest fan, the one who cheers the loudest. Trusting God is the best approach for people in every time and place. Only through faith can one find real joy. **David E. Gray**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).