

“For All The Saints”

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

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Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 August 2019

The writer of Hebrews—he writes in the style of Paul, but scholars don’t think the writer is Paul—wants to encourage the church by reminding the church of all the people who had come before them, and, by the grace of God, had kept the faith. The people mentioned are not perfect people, but they are people through whom God worked. They believed in what they could not see. They had faith in the promises God made. The writer is saying, *you are one of those people*. So, take heart. Have courage. Rejoice in the Lord. Do not be discouraged. Keep the faith.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen . . . 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” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd.

So, the writer wants to remind us of some of these faith-keepers from our collective past: Noah built an ark before it started raining, because he believed God’s word. Abraham left his comfortable home and followed God’s call to a strange land. Isaac and Jacob lived faithfully under the same promise. Esau. Joseph. Moses. Rahab. Gideon. David. Samuel. The prophets.

Through faith, they toppled kingdoms, made justice work, were protected from lions and fires, and turned disadvantage to advantage. Some won battles and some were stoned and sawed in two.

The writer of this letter to the Hebrews wants his readers to look back and take heart. Not to make these grand words seem small, but the writer of this letter is saying: *They did it; so can you*. But more radically, the writer of this letter wants his readers to believe that as God worked through the Bible-story headliners, God sure enough is and can work in and through you.

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This text invites us to think about and give thanks for people in our lives who came before us, who encouraged us, who helped us grow up.

Who are the faithful who nurtured you? Who gave you a second chance, your first job, that encouraging word when you most needed it? How did they help pass their faith along to you? Did anybody in your family pray at the dinner table every night, or kneel by the bedside at bedtime? This text invites us to think about the mom or dad, the coach or choir director who nurtured us in the faith.

This year, you are going to meet some of my heroes of the faith. In just a few weeks you’ll meet **John Williams**. He’s the chaplain of Austin College in Sherman, Texas. He and some of his students are going to regale us with Bible stories. John will preach on Sunday morning. Then, his students will work with our kids in Sunday school as John talks with us adults about what being a Presbyterian Christian has to do with living

in the modern world. John's writing over the years has made me more curious, has given me permission to wonder, and has enlivened my faith.

Alonso Johnson, preaching for us in November, has encouraged me with his sometimes outlandish sense of humor. Alonso reminds me, if the Gospel is Good News, why do we walk around with a graveyard on our back and lemon in our mouth? Thank you, Alonso.

Jeff Kellam is coming in April for a week as our "Theologian in Residence." He's going to attend Ebertfest (the movie festival) with us and help us debrief the movies we watch; Jeff is my mentor, was the best man at our wedding, and taught me not only how to produce media (radio, mainly) but how to think about it in terms of the faith. He has such keen insight and generous heart. I can't wait for your to meet him.

These saints, along with my wife, are some of the saints God has used to touch, encourage, and transform me. There are many others—many of **YOU** are in that number.

Who has God used to shape you? And—*this is* important—are you open to the ways God might be working through you right now to nurture others?

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The heroes of our faith are all people who can let us down. They are all people who are imperfect. They all fell short of God's glory. They hurt those they loved.

Their goodness (or badness) is not the point.

The point is they had faith in a God who loved and redeemed creation, a faith made complete in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They believed the promises of God were compelling and true. They followed Jesus who loved the unlovable and cared for the unreachable. They listened way more to the Spirit's whisper than to anybody's bottom line.

These imperfect saints let people down, maybe, but the God in whom they had faith, does not let people down. So,

"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, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith" NIV, Hebrews 12:1-2.

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²⁹By 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. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They 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⁻³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

¹Therefore, 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, ²looking 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.