

Commended for their Faith — Rev. Denise Stone

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Do you like to look through old photo albums? Why is that? What is it about looking back on events and people and places that fascinates us? I have many of my parent's old photo albums and I enjoy looking through them even though I don't know many of the people and places. I have a sister-in-law that spends lots of time on Ancestry.com and has done detailed work on both hers and my family tree. Some of the things she has uncovered have been fascinating. Many people like reliving the past and remembering family and friends through those kinds of activities.

Churches are no different than individuals. When you see the sign behind me that says Founded in 1827, what do you think of? Our church's motto has been "Pride in Our Past / Faith in our Future." This combines finding ourselves rooted in a line of believers in this place as well as looking forward to the work that God is doing and still intends to do in and through this place.

Today's text picks up in the book of Hebrews in the middle of a line of history of the people of Israel. Prior to where our passage begins today, the writer of Hebrews has given the history of the Patriarchs,

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and begins the story of Moses and the Exodus and Passover.

We pick up in verse 29 with the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites and the destruction of the Egyptian army. Also the story of bringing down of the walls of Jericho, where a Canaanite woman, Rahab, a prostitute, was saved because she had faith and protected the Israelite spies.

Verses 32 through 38 almost make you breathless as you read the list of other heroes of the faith. It feels as if the writer of Hebrews is running to his conclusion: from the triumphs of “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets”ⁱ to the recounting of people who suffered for their faith.

Which brings us to verses 39 and 40, “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.”

All of the heroes of the faith, even though they were commended for their faith, they died without receiving the promise of God. That promise came only in the presence and salvation through Jesus Christ.

In his commentary on Hebrews, Professor Gareth Lee Cockerill describes this as being “made perfect” and writes, “The faithful of old could not experience this being ‘made perfect’ through the cleansing of sin ‘without us’ because Christ had not yet come. The [writer of Hebrews, or as Professor Cockerill calls him pastor, the] pastor’s implication is that now, since Christ has come, all the faithful experience this cleansing from sin and access to God through Christ.”ⁱⁱ

It is with this understanding of being made perfect through Jesus that the writer of Hebrews brings us to verses 1-2 of Chapter 12. I suspect that even if you have not been in church long, you have probably heard these verses,

12 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.

Who are the “great cloud of witnesses?” They are the heroes of the faith who came before. They are role models – even though the people listed in chapter 11 include prostitutes and adulterers. Despite their flaws, they were commended by God for their faith. In these two verses the people being written to in Hebrews are being encouraged to persevere in their faith despite the trials and persecution that they face. They are encouraged to cast off the weights of this world and their sin and to look to Jesus, called the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” who has set the path for us.

Bryan J. Whitfield, Professor at Mercer University, wrote in his article on this passage,

Pioneer translates a particularly rich Greek word, *archegos*. The *archegos* is the author, the beginner, the instigator, the impetus, the trailblazer who goes before us. Here the writer has in mind the first namesake of Jesus-- Joshua, son of Nun, who scouted out the land of promise. Just so, this new Jesus has been the scout, blazing a trail through all of human existence and tested in every way like all of us, yet finding joy at the end of the suffering of the cross.

But there is more. In the context of a race, the *archegos* is the team captain. In the Greek games, the team captain would run the race and then wait at the finish line to encourage his teammates as they followed in his steps.

Yet Jesus is not simply the pioneer; he is also the perfecter. Here the author of Hebrews has in mind a second namesake of Jesus-- Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the first high priest after the exile. Priests perfect and complete what we lack, bringing us to our goal so that we may have full access to the presence of God. So Jesus not only calls us across the finish line but also fills in and fills out what is lacking in our faithfulness. He takes our incomplete faith and makes it whole.ⁱⁱⁱ

This whole passage was a very powerful source of inspiration and encouragement for the congregation to which the writer of Hebrews was addressing. They were living in a time of persecution for their faith. They probably were feeling discouraged and wondering if it was all worth it. In these verses, they have been reminded of the stories they had heard from the time they were little and how those heroes had thrived and persevered in hard times. They were reminded that Jesus Christ had come to bring fullness and fulfillment to the long ago made promises of God.

What about us? Where do you see yourself in this story? Do you feel discouraged and wondering if it has been worth it? Do you feel disconnected from your heritage of faith? We all do from time to time. I think we all have felt times where we wondered where God was or if God actually cared.

Here in the United States, Christians we suffer very little for our faith. At most we are sometimes caricatured in the media as unenlightened or superstitious people. It seems more often we are victims of our own making. We may try to be more like the Jones' at times rather than being like Christ.

It is at those times that we need to claim our heritage of faith. Not just those mentioned in Scripture, but those that have helped us in our walk of faith in our lives. For some of us we can probably name parents and Sunday School teachers and preachers as part of the cloud of witnesses that we can claim. Not all of us can say that this church in Big Flats has been a long part of our "cloud," but many of you can.

On one hand I love that this church has a long history that can be pointed to – you look about this sanctuary and church building and you will see names and dates of important people and events that have happened.

On the other hand, I wonder if it isn't possible for us (on a more global scale as Christians) to be focused on how things "used to be" that we forget to look toward to what God is doing now and will be doing in the future. Is it more important that we are reminded that we were founded in 1827 or is it more important that we are followers of Christ?

Do we find ourselves putting "aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and [running] 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?"

Can we claim that we, like those heroes of faith who have gone before us, will be commended for our faith? Let us pray and strive towards that goal and then with God's help, maybe we can!

Pray with me.

Holy God, you have led us to worship you here this morning. May we run with perseverance the race set before us, following Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. And may you find us worthy to be commended for our faith.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

ⁱ All Scripture passages quoted are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ “11:39-40.” *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, by Gareth Lee Cockerill, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012, p. 598.

ⁱⁱⁱ Whitfield, Bryan J. “Commentary on Hebrews 11:29-12:2 by Bryan J. Whitfield.” *Hebrews 11:29-12:2 Commentary by Bryan J. Whitfield - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week (RCL)*, Luther Seminary, 2010, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=657.