

Preaching Copy: Hebrews 11:39-12:3 “Can I Be That Faithful?”

10th Sunday @ Pentecost – Proper 15

Sunday, August 14th, 2022

Text: Hebrews 11:39-12:3

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. ¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

The text's intent

The heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 did remarkable things, but also suffered horribly for their faith. None received the final goal that they longed for and held fast to, the perfecting sacrifice that is the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who is the founder and perfecter of their faith and ours. We can be encouraged by this great cloud of witnesses and how God worked through the faith He gave them to do remarkable things, but in our own life we look to Christ and His word of law which casts aside the sin that holds us back and His word of Gospel that provides the endurance and strength we need to continue on against opposition from the world and my own sinful heart. We look to how much Christ suffered for us and know that He is working repentance through our struggles to keep us from growing weary or fainthearted. His Spirit keeps our eyes focused on His life, death, and resurrection, and the eternal life to come that we hold fast to by the faith He gives.

Focus Statement:

The heroes of faith, as well as us, do not have what it takes to live out such lives of exemplified faith. But the founder and perfecter of our faith comes to us in His Word to do what we cannot, create and sustain that faith. It is centered on the One whose suffering, death, and resurrection was the unseen hope of all these Old Testament heroes. They looked forward to it just as we look to Him with our eyes of faith. And from His place at the right hand of the Father He works through His law to cast aside the sins that would hold us back and the Gospel that lifts us up and keeps us striving forward to the eternal life to come.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We look to the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 as well as those examples of faithful living around us and can see ourselves as being lesser members of God's kingdom, 2nd class, and wonder how we could ever live up to that.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Trust that our Lord Jesus Christ is working in their lives to perfect their faith through times of success and failure, ensuring that we do not grow fainthearted but continue on in steadfast faith unto life everlasting.

Subject Sentence: Only Jesus founds and perfects the faith we need

Introduction

I've always had a deep respect for those who choose to be missionaries. Partly because of the dedication it takes to give your life over in service to the Lord like that, but also because I know I don't have within me what it takes to do that myself. I recently read an article about Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, Christian missionaries who met in college but didn't get married until they both found themselves in the mission field in Ecuador in the 1950's. They were married in 1953 and were sent out to make contact with and bring the Gospel to a remote tribe of indigenous people. Three years later Jim and four other missionaries working with him were killed by that tribe they were trying to reach, leaving Elisabeth to raise their 10-month-old daughter alone. While most women would've have given up in bitterness and grief, Elisabeth ended up returning the country, meeting two women from that tribe, and was allowed into their midst to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with them. That takes strength of faith, a strength that I'm not sure I would have in her place.

But I don't have to look to far to see strong faith in action, I only have to look to downtown Flint and my brother in Christ and fellow Pastor Christian Jones who is a Missionary at Large for the Michigan District serving the Flint Mission Network and Franklin Avenue Mission. Unlike myself who was called to an established Church that is self-sustaining, he chose to be a Missionary, serving as Pastor at a Church that cannot sustain itself or pay him. Both Flint Mission Network and Pastor Jones rely on the gracious gifts that come from the Michigan District, and especially from Lamb of God and other congregations in our Tri-Circuit. Along with the stress and difficulty he faces trying to make ends meet, especially now as contributions have fallen as the price of everything else rises, he faces ministry in a tough neighborhood where there are drugs, gangs, arsonists, and a great need for not only temporal needs, but an even greater need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I look to him and see gifts and talents that I do not have. I see a strength of faith that is remarkable. And I often think that I don't have what it takes to answer his call to ministry.

The Heroes Of Faith In Hebrews Chapter 11

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us

The author of Hebrews remarks that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, those witnesses being all the Old Testament Heroes of faith mentioned in Chapter 11. He states that we should be encouraged and strengthened by their faith to preserver through the problems we encounter in our lives today. But as I read through Chapter 11, I'm left with a different feeling. I'm left wondering how I can ever live up to the examples of faith that these men and women witnessed through their lives.

Chapter 11 tells us about Moses. It is remarkable that his parents would defy the order of Pharaoh to kill all the baby boys born to the Hebrews when, if discovered, it would've meant death for the child as well as for them. But even more remarkable is Moses' choice not to remain the extravagant lifestyle that he had as a prince of Egypt, but instead to face Pharaoh as a rebel, and demand he let the people of Israel go. Also remarkable is his faith that the blood of a sacrificed Lamb painted on the door posts of the Israelite houses would save their firstborn from the death that would visit all the rest of Egypt. It's the same strength of faith that moved him to hold out his staff so that the waters of the Red Sea would part, and the same faith that moved all the people to walk through on dry ground with the waters piled up on either side.

Then there is Rahab, a prostitute living in Jericho. It is the first city on the list to be destroyed as the nation of Israel crosses the Jordan River to begin its conquest of the Promised Land. Joshua sends spies into the city, and they come to her brothel because it is the most inconspicuous place for a foreigner to visit, and a good place to find out information. But she recognizes who they are and what they are planning to do. She should have blown the whistle on them to the city authorities, but she doesn't. Instead she agrees to conceal them and help them escape down the city wall. If she had been caught doing this, it would've meant death for her and her family. But she is willing to risk it all because of her faith in the God that these spies serve. She has heard of all the amazing things the LORD had done for them, from their escape from Egypt leading up to His giving them the land of Canaan. By faith she believes in the LORD as the one true God and is willing to risk her life to serve Him. And she is rewarded for her faithful actions. She survives the conquest of Jericho. And not only that, but this foreigner also becomes a part of the Messianic line as David would be her descendant, and from David would come Jesus Christ.

But for me, the one who tops the list of the heroes of faith is Abraham. He waited most of his life to have a son, waited as the LORD kept promising him that he would not only have a son, but as we read last Sunday, the LORD promised that from that son would come descendants more numerous than stars in the sky or sand on the seashore. And from them One would come who would bless the whole world. But then the command comes from the LORD that Abraham take that one and only son that he waited so long for up on a mountain and sacrifice him on an altar. Think about the journey to that mountain, the struggle in Abraham's heart, knowing what the LORD had asked of him. Knowing what this would mean for that long-awaited child of promise, yet he was ready to follow through in obedience to the LORD's command anyway. He had the sacrificial knife poised to deliver the death blow before the LORD called him to stop. How could Abraham do this? **Hebrews 11:19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.** Abraham believed so firmly that the LORD would keep his promise that He would raise Isaac from the dead if that's what it took. That's a strong faith, one I'm not sure I have.

Hebrews 11:33-35a ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ^{35a} Women received back their dead by resurrection.

The author goes on to mention the remarkable acts that many of the heroes of faith accomplished. And with each one of them I know that I don't have what it takes to accomplish what they did.

Hebrews 11:35b-38 ^{35b} Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated---³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy---wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

The lives of the heroes of faith were not victory after victory. For many it meant intense suffering: verbal as those around them sought to ruin their reputation, physical beatings and flogging, imprisonment, and being executed in a manner that makes my skin crawl. Others had to live in a constant state of need and want, afflicted and mistreated. Yet they held fast to their faith in the LORD. And I'm left to wonder how long against such treatment I would hold out.

Jesus: The Founder and Perfector of Our Faith

Hebrews 11:39-40 ³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

All of those heroes in faith did not live to see or receive the promise they held fast to by that faith. Yet they held fast and believed nonetheless that the LORD is the gracious and merciful God who fulfills all His promises to those He calls to faith. They held on to their faith that something better was coming. And that holding fast to the promise of the LORD is what declared them to be saved, to be in right standing with God, declared them that although sinners, they were declared perfect in God's eyes. They could be declared in right-standing with God because of the promised gift that He would send to earn that right standing with all men. That something better has come and has declared to us as well as them to be in right-standing with our God. That something better is Jesus.

Hebrews 12:2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus is the source and substance of our faith. The only reason we are declared worthy to receive such a wonderful gift as faith is because He earned it for us. He earned it by enduring the torturous suffering and death on the cross that our faithlessness deserved. He was willing to endure the shameful death of one despised and rejected by God so that we might be saved from an eternity lived apart from Him. He lived out His life in complete trust and obedience to God. And He rose again from the grave and ascended to the right hand of the Father from where He bestows all the wonderful gifts He has earned for us, including the faith given in your baptism to hold that all He has done is for you.

Your faith is founded by His gift of the Holy Spirit in your baptism. Through your baptism faith is planted in your heart and mind and no one else can steal it away from you. You and I don't have what it takes to live out the exemplary life of the heroes of faith. Neither did the heroes of faith on their own. No one does. It comes to all, to them, and to you as a gift from our founder and perfecter. He not only plants it but works to perfect it, to make it stronger. He does this as we encounter some of those "faith trying" events that occurred to our heroes of faith. Maybe yours are not to the same degree, but trials, suffering, temptation, all happen in your life and my life. And our Perfecter of faith uses them to stretch our faith and make it stronger.

Of course our lives lived out in faith will never be perfect. There are times when we stumble into disobedience and sin. There are times when we will grow weary and fainthearted. That's why we need not just a founder but a perfecter of our faith. When we buckle under those trials, sufferings, and temptations our perfecter sends His words of Law to show us how and where we failed. But He doesn't leave us there. He shares His Gospel of grace and forgiveness which has the power to restore our flagging faith and give us the hope to carry on. And just as did those heroes of faith, we too live in expectation of that something better that is to come, eternal life when all that we hold to by faith will be made clear and set before our eyes.

Conclusion

There once was a man who saw that his neighbor was unable to care for his lawn. So without waiting to be asked he took time out his weekly schedule to mow his lawn, not accepting any repayment. There once a lady who came across someone grieving the loss of their spouse. So she set aside time to visit with her, bring meals to her, be a listening and caring ear to her. There once several members of a local congregation who set aside time in their weekly schedule to head down and serve meals and visit with the dinner guests at Franklin Avenue Mission. All of these are heroes of the faith. All are making the sacrifices based not on what they can earn in this life, but on who they can demonstrate the love of Christ to, and possibly open the door for the Spirit to found and begin perfecting faith in the hearts of another. You don't have to give up your house and life to lead people out of slavery to be a hero of faith. You don't have to suffer intense persecution, face the hungry mouths of lions, or be thrown into a fiery furnace to be a hero of faith. And you don't have to be willing to sacrifice your only son, that's already been done. And because of that sacrifice we have the founder and perfecter of our faith who is Jesus Christ. Through repentant lives lived out in faith toward Him, we are all heroes of the faith. You don't have to sign up to be a missionary. You already are one in the life roles you've been given by Him right now. You are His hero of faith whenever you demonstrate that faith in Jesus Christ in word and action, and especially when you look to His grace and forgiveness for the times you fall short. Amen.