

Hebrews 11:29-12:2 Cloud of Witnesses 2  
August 14, 2022

When I was in seminary, in a preaching class, there was an African American student who was a junior member of the staff at a large church that had a seasoned senior pastor, who also served as a kind of mentor for the other members of the staff. He once commented on a piece of advice about preaching he had received from the senior minister.

Who said:

Get up  
Start slow  
Rise high  
Catch on fire  
And sit down in the flames

I have always been humbled by that advice because I have never felt very confident about reaching the heights or catching on fire. And to be honest, I am a little afraid of heights, and terrified of fire.

The Letter to the Hebrews is a halftime motivational speech, designed to rally believers around their common goal, and to inspire them to continue the journey of faith through to the end. It is a halftime speech because it does not come at the beginning, but is written for people who are well on their way and have experienced disappointment, become discouraged and confused, and have been tempted to

call the whole project into question, and maybe give up altogether.

And if it *is* a motivational speech (to stay with the metaphor), then the 11th and 12th chapters are the the reaching of the heights, the catching on fire, before sitting down in the flames. And almost 2,000 years later the followers of Jesus are still in need of its encouragement and inspired by its message, as they find themselves in circumstances simply not foreseen by those who authored the scriptures or heard them read aloud, all that time ago.

For all of the gradual changes the world has seen in the tens of thousands of years since human beings have inhabited the earth, those associated with modernity, more than any other, have boggled the mind, as I sometimes say, and staggered the imagination. Yet *this* passage still encourages, still inspires.

As we began to see last Sunday, The part of the Letter to the Hebrews we have read today summarizes much of the story of Israel in terms, not of the failures and disappointments, which were many, but the endurance of those who stayed with the journey, no matter the odds against them.

And not only were the odds against them, but very often, their own failures and disappointments and limitations. We learned last week that their determination to persevere made it clear that they

were looking for something more, “a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” The “roll call of faith” begins with Abel and Enoch and Noah, and then Abraham and Sarah. The story continues with Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, and then Moses, who led the people out of Egypt. Today we pick up the story with the entrance into the land that would become Israel. The battle of Jericho is mentioned, and Rahab the harlot, but interestingly, not Joshua, for some reason. But no matter.

Even that feels like only a preliminary because Israel seemed doomed from the start to be conquered, which by the time of the Letter, it *had* been five times; by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. These names may not even seem real, like Rohan and Gondor and Middle Earth, but they are not a fiction. They are our history.

Upon reflection, the ones who lived it, or at least some of them, knew that they were aliens and strangers on earth, which is a strange thing for earthlings to say. They were searching for more than any historical nation could ever be. They were searching, “for a better country, a heavenly one.”

This is not merely history, it is interpreted history, and what it tells *us*, is that for all the changes associated with the modern era, the technological advancements of transportation and communications and other things that characterize our world, and the vastly different ways of living everyday life that distinguish us from our spiritual ancestors, we are still essentially in

the same boat they were, on the same journey, looking for the same better country. The more things change, as the saying goes, the more they stay the same.

And we are not looking for a more beautiful country, or more enchanting, we have beauty and enchantment enough, but one characterized at last by justice and peace, and in which people can and do live with integrity and honor, compassion and empathy, mercy and love, peace and joy.

It is here that the Letter catches fire. “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets,” and then he takes the time to recite their accomplishments,

“ . . . who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.”

And then it changes from the triumphant to the triumphantly tragic. “There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning: they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and

mistreated— the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

And he did not know about all the faithful since, of the last 2,000 years, St. Francis and Bernard of Clairveaux, Brother Lawrence and Savonarola, Martin Luther and John Calvin, Schweizer, Bishop Tutu, Mother Theresa, or the one's presently, most of them anonymously, living by faith. Even the ones here in this room.

There is so much happening in the world that it is easy to miss the presence of the faithful and their affect on our lives. It truly is a great cloud of witnesses, as it turns out, none of them perfect, some of them beleaguered and exhausted, but true to the end.

And so let us agree with the conclusion we find here;

“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 run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sitting down, (in the flames), at the right hand of the throne of God.”