

Walk By Faith

August 8, 2010

Hebrews 11:1 – 3, 8 – 16

Listen now for the Reading of God's Word for the People of God.

¹Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for.

³By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

⁸By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

¹¹By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

This is the Word of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Lord God of all creation, you are such a gracious host. As we prepare for your Word today, we cannot help but ask ourselves, "How is it that we should be so honored to receive your goodness?" You have prepared a table for us in the midst of our daily struggles, our successes, our failures and most especially in the presence of those who speak against us. You anoint us, wash us and feed us and you do all this in spite of all that we have done or more likely not done for you. Today, we acknowledge you, your holiness and your word and we vow to listen for your Will and Way for our lives. By faith we stand and worship you today. By faith we will walk and we will work as you have instructed. By faith we profess that Christ is indeed alive and that your Holy Spirit can and will move us to do and to be more than we ever thought possible. We pray all this in the name of Your Son – our Savior – Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you've been paying very close attention over the past several months to our weekly sermon scriptures, you may find yourself alarmed this morning. Our weekly sermons tend to focus on the Gospel readings, but this morning I believe that God has called us to look intently at the Hebrew's reading this today. And why not? We often say that Common Time offers us an opportunity to look at the familiar stories of the Bible. This has, for many of us, become an anticipation of the teachings of Christ. However, in taking this approach, we prevent ourselves from hearing about the ancient tales of the Old Testament and the wonderful teachings of the Apostles following Christ's return to heaven. So this morning, God has a word for each of us and God offers this to us not only in the recounting of a single Bible Story, but by reminding us of the tales of many of the great men and women of faith that came before Christ himself walked on the Earth.

Hebrews is one of the great Epistles of Paul. It tells of all sorts of incredible people. In fact, when read in its entirety and with any sense of sincerity, it can be quite intimidating. If we are not careful, it can begin to make the mightiest of us feel small and seemingly insignificant. Imagine the way you might have felt as you encountered your childhood hero for the first time. For me, that person would have been my mentor, Dr. Wong, who has written many books and delivered many lectures about classroom management, best practices of education and pedagogy. I had the pleasure of meeting and having lunch with him at the 2003 National Staff Development Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. My only thoughts at the time were, "Ah, I'll never be like that!" It was intimidating because here is this great man of education who has affected so many and taught so many to be better teachers and leaders within their profession and here I am a lowly mathematics educator struggling some days just to get by. Here is a man that has done so much to curb the best practices of education and here I am – a nobody.

The portion of Hebrews read this morning is the roll-call of the faithful of Israel. Here we are reminded of all sorts of people who did incredible things by faith. Though not contained within the actual reading this morning, we do find in the verses contained here and those that read to the end of Chapter 4 people like Noah, who built an ark for years before the rains ever fell. (v. 7) There's Enoch, who was so holy that he didn't die.

One day he just took a walk and ended up in heaven. (v. 5) Did you know that? Abraham, who one day put his entire life on hold, took everything that he had and moved because God said so is also mentioned here. (v. 8) Then there is Moses, the greatest figure of the Old Testament, the one who did God's greatest work before the time of Jesus. (vv. 23 – 28) There's Joshua, leading the people across the Jordan and dropping the walls of Jericho with trumpets. (v. 30)

All of these individuals did incredible things through their faith in God. Lives were changed, history was affected and God's Kingdom, little by little, was beginning to find itself once again entering into this lost and dying world; all as a result of their faithfulness to listen to God and act as they were called to do. "Ah, I'll never be like that." Here are these great men of Christian History curbing the best practices of the Christian faith and here I am – a no body. But if we read closely, we begin to find a glimmer of hope in verse 31. "By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient." Wait a minute, did we just read, "Prostitute"? Surely there is some mistake. Surely amongst all the great saints of old mentioned before we don't have a prostitute being held up in the same regard. But we do.

Many of us have come to believe that we are not good enough for God and that God cannot use us because we are not worthy of his love and grace. And why should we feel any different than the way we do. Our community has been marginalized for so long and has been oppressed by so many, especially those we revere to be "Good Christians" that can't help but begin to believe what has been taught to us. But if Christ didn't die for the likes of us, then who did he die for? Michael shared a bumper sticker with me this week that reads, "Jesus called, he wants his religion back." It reminds me of a t-shirt I once saw when I was in college that read, "Jesus, please deliver me from your followers." In essence, both of these are prime examples of the desire of so many today; to regain what has been taken away from us and that is a personal relationship with our God through the blood of Jesus Christ. We, as the chosen people of God, cannot (as one man's stated in his response to the overturning of Proposition 8) allow the majority to take away the rights of the minority. Likewise, we cannot allow the fundamentalist Christian majority to take away any minorities right to the love of

God and here, amongst the words of Paul's writings, we see that even God himself acknowledges Rahab, a marginalized minority in her own right, and her place in the bringing forth of God's Kingdom and God's plan.

We are to stop listening to the secular majority and start listening to God's voice in our lives and know that God has a plan for each and every one of us. Your self-worth and your importance in God's plan is not defined by what man says about you, but rather is defined by what God says and God's says, "I have loved the people of the world so much that I was willing to sacrifice my one and only Son that ANYONE who believes (not some, not a few, not only those who are in the majority) but ANYONE who believes will not perish but will live forever. I did not send my Son into the world to condemn my people, but rather I sent him to save the world through him." (John 3:16 – 17). The King James translation refers to the anyone as a *whosoever* and I am happy to tell you today that each and every one of you here today is a *whosoever*.

Our God doesn't go to just the nice, friendly, church-going religious folk to get the job done. Our God reaches out to a prostitute inside an enemy city and invites her to become part of the people of God. God reached out to a tax collector in the Temple who finally figured out how to pray and to a thief on a cross who finally gets it together. I am not willing to say that simply because an individual is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered that they immediately fall into the same category as the prostitute, the tax collector or the thief on the cross. I will, however, say that any individual who has not yet found their place in God's kingdom – regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, race, age, physical challenge, health status, gender identification, nationality or economic status – falls into the same category as Rahab, the tax collector and the thief on the cross.

So, to say that we are not worthy of God's love is unacceptable. To believe that God has created you and turned away from you is ridiculous, at best. God loves you, God needs you and has called each of us to something bigger and better than anything we ourselves can even begin to imagine. But we must be willing to walk in God's Will and Way for our lives and that means we must be willing to walk by faith. The opening lines to Chapter 4 remind us of this, ". . . faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not

see.” (v. 1) Can you say that with me this morning? Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

When we look at the Rahab model, we see things we might have been tempted to overlook before. That is, the standard of measurement for the marginalized is not accomplishment but faith; being sure of that we hope for and confident of what we do not see. If you leave here today with nothing else, I want you to leave here today with the recognition that some of what the world has taught us is grossly false. The idea that if you can't measure something, quantify it and repeat it, then it isn't real does not hold true when it comes to the glory and power of God. We are not called to believe based solely on what we see, but rather we are called to see once we have and because we have believed. Over and over again, the Bible teaches us, that, for the most significant things in life to be seen we must believe. If you don't believe, then you will not see. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

I would venture to say that someone listening today is thinking to themselves, “I'm not worthy, God would never want me or accept me.” Get that out of your head right now! Let it go! Emmett Cardinal Carter of Toronto once said, “A saint [that is the *whosoever*s John writes about] isn't someone who's perfect. A saint is someone who, when they stumble and fall, is willing to let God pick them up, dust themselves off and start on their way again.” Ask yourself this question today, are you willing to let God do this for you?

Maybe you've made some mistake in your life, made a wrong turn in your life or simply done something dumb. The memory of these events can weigh heavy on our lives and hold us back. Let it go! The Bible teaches us that if we ask for forgiveness, the God is faithful and just to forgive us of whatever it is that separates us from our God. Our sin is cast as far as the east is from the west . . . these things, whatever they may be, are known no more. Let them go. If this is a struggle for you, then ask God today to help you with this. Be willing today to let God do this for you! What in faith today as you begin to believe in what you hope for and become confident of what you cannot see. Amen.

(Some of today's sermon was adapted from a sermon entitled *Unlikely Saints* by Reverend Ross Bartlett of the United Church of Canada, Halifax, Nova Scotia. It is our prayer that God continue to richly bless Rev. Bartlett and his ministry. <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/c-or19-bartlett.php>)