

When All Is Said And Done
August 15, 2010
Hebrews 11:29-12:2

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

²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.

³¹By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

³²And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched 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. ³⁵Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. ³⁶Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. ³⁷They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— ³⁸the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. ⁴⁰God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

¹Therefore, 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. ²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

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

Let us pray:

God of all Creation, open our eyes that we may see, our ears that we may hear, our hearts that we may feel and our minds that we may come to understand your Will and our Way for our lives today. May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Today's reading is a continuation of last week's lesson on *Walking in Faith* and last week's major character is mentioned in today's reading. Rahab, the prostitute, is mentioned here amongst the roll call of the faithful. By many of today's standards, Rahab seems a very unlikely candidate to be mentioned here amongst so many favored and blessed of God. Like many of us, she had probably not been told by very many that God loved her, but somehow at some time in her life, the stories of Israel and their God had come to Rahab and she had listened intently to them and had hid them in her heart. When it came time to serve God; when it came time to do what was right in lieu of what the majority had to say, Rahab did what was right.

Rahab's story is told in the book of Joshua, in the Old Testament. The king of Jericho received word that Israelite spies were in the city. Soldiers searched the city for them, but Rahab took them in and hid them on her roof. She told the soldiers that the spies had left the city before the gates were closed for the night. Even though a pagan, the stories of what God had done for the people of Israel had reached Rahab and others in Jericho. Rightly so, the people were afraid. Rahab listened and believed in the power of God and accepted what God had to offer. She said to the spies as they hid under the stalks of flax, "I know that the Lord has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt . . . the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath." Joshua 2: 9 – 11 (NKJV) Before the spies left her home, they promised Rahab that she and her family would be saved for helping them. She believed them and trusted in the Lord God of Israel.¹

¹http://protestantism.suite101.com/article.cfm/women_of_the_bible_rahab

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. Rather than reading the stories of the Bible and listening to God's voice in our own lives, just as Rahab had done, we have come to listen to the voices of the world; the prejudicial majority. Our community has been marginalized for so long and has been oppressed by so many, particularly by those we revere to be "Good Christians," that we can't help but begin to believe what has been taught to us.

Paul is writing to an oppressed people and attempting to encourage them in their faith. Paul understands that what they need is to draw on the ancient teachings of faith and to hold fast to God's Word and promises, regardless of the cost and regardless of the perceived success of the outcome. Listen to what Paul has to say:

³²*And what more shall I say?*

Paul knew his words were simple and straight forward. How much discussion does there really need to be about this? God is God. God can and will take care of your every need and has made promises with the intentions of following through.

I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched 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.

Those who attest that social justice has no place in God's Kingdom have not read the interpretations and writings of Paul. Not through their own desires or own doing, but through

FAITH kingdoms have been conquered, justice has been and will continue to be administered, the promises of God have – in time – been gained and the flames of fury have been quenched, people have found protection from harm and those who have been considered weak have been made powerful and strong. In essence, the word of Romans 8:31 are being echoed here, that is “If God be for us, then who can be against us.”

Paul continues with the assurances of Christ ministry and teachings. ³⁵*Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.* ³⁶*Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison.* ³⁷*They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—* ³⁸*the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.*

Though the exact group to which Paul was writing is not specifically known, we do know that these were a select group of people in a specific area, which had particular problems and concerns which needed addressing. (Sounds a bit like the ministry of New Day, ICCC, Lighthouse Ministries of Clayton and the network of churches which is New Covenant of Atlanta – doesn't it) The events of history that followed Jesus' death and resurrection were, to say the least, tumultuous for Christians. (The events of history surrounding the LGBTQ Community since the Stonewall Riots of 1969 have been tumultuous at best) Persecution was running rampant and we are not talking about a few disgruntled Jews pleading their cases in court. We are talking major bloodshed – people are being stoned, tortured and maimed and are being killed for their faith. (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered individuals today are being stoned, tortured, maimed and hung on fence posts for being true to the person that God created them to

be; for being true to themselves and to their God) Paul refers to that persecution here in his writings and he is encouraging them in it. Paul had once led the persecutions against Christians and now he is writing to these people and telling them to hang in there; the battle they are finding is worth it. (There are political leaders today defending your right to marry who once stood publically and said, “No Way!” Though they may never see the promises of God come to term, just as those listed in the roll call earlier, they could be assured that God has a plan. “These were all commended for their faith,” Paul writes, “yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:39 – 40)

We, too, are not to give up on the faith. When times get rough or our plans do not manifest themselves in the way we think that they should, then we are to continue reading God’s Word, listening to God’s voice in our lives and reveling in the teachings of Christ. There may be dissention in the church, our favorite candidate for office may not be elected, we may not get the teacher we wanted for a particular class, we may find that our application for a new job may be denied, yet again or we may not have our same sex monogamous relationship acknowledged by the state we live in or by our families and friends. However, we are to continue to run the race, to fight the good fight and to trust that God has a plan; one that is bigger and better than anything we could have ever imagined. “Together,” Paul writes, “Together with us [would the plans of God] be made perfect.”

God looks beyond our weaknesses and uses us, together, for the betterment of something bigger and better. Eighteen months ago, New Day Worship Center was only a glimmer in God’s eye; something bigger and better than any of us as individuals could have hoped for or dreamt of. If any one of us had tried to do things on our own, we would have probably failed miserably.

But together, with Christ by our side, we have come to see community created, souls saved, relationships renewed and God's Kingdom begin to break forth amongst a group of people that had been forgotten, put aside, if you will; much like Rahab had been in her own time.

So what should we hope to gain today? Where will our journey take us and what exactly is it that God has in store for each of us? I'm not sure. Only God knows and we are to put our trust fully in God's protection and guidance. We are instructed, however, how we are to face the journey we are on. As Paul writes, "¹Therefore, 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." We are to keep our eyes on the model God has given us, our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ who endured the cross and scorned its shame because he had the assurance of the joy that was to come. Let us, too, hold to that same joy for the sake of the journey we are on.

When it's all been said and done, what will we have gained? Will it be another million dollars in the bank, another car in the driveway or another entertainment system to brag about at work; or will it be another person brought back into relationship with Christ; another person made to know that God loves them or another oppressed individual being given hope from a world that has their own interest at heart rather than God's plan?

As we sing our sermon hymn today, know first and foremost that God loves you. The world may tell you that you are unworthy and the world may tell you that God doesn't want you, but God's Word teaches us different. God doesn't only want you, God needs you. God needs you to be true to yourself and to tell others about the love that God has for you and for them. In the words of Anthony Robbins, "You are now at a crossroads. This is your opportunity to make

the most important decision you will ever make. Forget your past. Who are you now? Who have you decided you really are now? Don't think about who you have been. Who are you now? Who have you decided to become? Make this decision consciously. Make it carefully. Make it powerfully. . . If you always do what you've always done, then you will always get what you've always gotten.”

At the end of our journey, when it's all been said and done, there is just one thing that matters and it's not what the world has to say about you, or what we have to say about ourselves, but rather it is about what God has to say about us and how we live our lives to reflect the worth that God has placed on us. Amen.