



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Walking by Faith”

The Rev. Sarah Wiles

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The Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

We don't know much about the book we call Hebrews. We don't know who wrote it. We don't know exactly when it was written. We don't know where it was written, or if it was intended to be sent to other people somewhere else and where they might have been. We're not even sure about the form. Maybe it's a letter, or maybe it's a sermon dressed up to look like a letter.

There is maybe just one thing about the context of this writing that we can be fairly sure about. The community that was to receive this writing needed encouragement. They had drooping hands and weak knees the author says at one point, and we can assume they also had flagging spirits and faint hearts.

It is as if the dedication for this writing, if it had one would read:

for you who are weary,

for you who doubt,

for you who carry guilt and shame, or burdens too heavy,

for you who, as we sometimes say in our words of invitation to communion,

for you who have tried to follow Christ, and you who have failed,

Come, says the author of Hebrews, you are welcome here, I have a word for you today.

You ask how are we to live in the midst of everything going on—in the midst of the heartache and grief and persecution and tragedy? How are we to live?

And Hebrews answers: by faith. We live by faith for the sake of the joy set before us.

Like Abel, and Enoch, and Noah, and Abraham, and Sarah, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph, and Moses, like the people who by faith passed through the Red Sea, like the people who by faith saw the walls of Jericho fall, like Rahab, and Gideon, and Barak, and Samson, and Jephthah, and David and Samuel—Oh! time would fail me to tell of them all says the author! Live by faith!

By faith, by faith... What does it mean to live by faith?

We might guess from this list that it means we need to either work miracles or experience them on a grand scale. It's an intimidating list on first look, isn't it? Intimidating and foreign. Who are all these people?

We might know Abraham and Moses and David? But how about Rahab? Or Gideon? Or Enoch? Or Jephthah? At first this litany might just make us feel inadequate. I don't know half of them, we might say, and the ones I do know, well, they're almost superheroes. They conquered lands and survived floods and parted the sea! How can these superheroes show human me how to live by faith?

But let's take another look. Some of these guys are indeed high achievers, but not all of them. The list goes on and includes people whose names the author doesn't even know—widows, prisoners, wanderers without a home. And even the highest achievers, the Moses and David and Abraham, they're all flawed—on this list there are murderers, and adulterers, and thieves, and liars. So here is at least one thing we can say about what it is to live by faith, or rather, what it is not about:

It's not about being a superhero, high achiever, perfect person. It's not about being Superman, or a gladiator, or Jason Bourne, or James Bond—the lone cowboy riding into the sunset, solving problems all alone and never feeling weakness. No, says Hebrews, real people with flaws and forgettable names and ordinary stories are welcome. That means you and me. And we definitely, unlike superheroes, don't have to do it by ourselves. In fact, we can't. We cannot live by faith by ourselves.

The first thing the author of Hebrews tells us is that living by faith is to live in the company of others, to be surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. I'm grateful for our Calvinist heritage for many reasons, but one thing we miss out on is the habit of lavishly decorating our sanctuaries with images of people of faith. We have our stained glass windows here, but if you've ever been to the Sistine chapel or the cathedral in Florence or any number of medieval churches, you know what I mean. You look up and gasp at the literal cloud of witnesses silently accompanying the faithful in worship through the years. It's a concrete visual reminder that we are never in this faith business alone.

How are we going to make it in this world? How will we face our weariness or guilt or grief or whatever? Well, says our text, we're going to do it together—with each other in this room, with those who have gone before, and those who are coming after.

This is as clear a critique as I know of our contemporary habit of thinking

1. that religion is a private matter,
2. that spirituality is something that can be pursued individually,
3. that a relationship with God need not involve others.

There are good reasons why we might wish we could live out our faith privately.

4. Others are messy.
5. They sometimes whisper during worship, or sing off key.
6. They show up late for meetings and talk too much.

And as for those who've gone before—well,

1. they have some very unfashionable ideas,
2. and they often use convoluted sentences,
3. and they are in fact just plain ancient.

It's tempting to think that others are just an impediment, and we're better off on our own. But, says Hebrews, we are all in this together.

To be a person of faith is to be a person with others. Why? As the author of Hebrews would say - Oh! time would fail me to tell all the reasons, so let me just mention three:

1. it can be handy to learn from others' mistakes instead of our own,
2. having to be concerned with others' needs helps rub the hard edges off of our own narcissism,
3. we might at some point be lonely or have a broken leg or a new baby or in some way need someone else to fix dinner.

And then of course, the Bible says we need each other.

1. At the very beginning God declares it's not good for us to be alone,
2. and then there's Jesus who as soon as he began to minister found others to be with him,
3. and even our very God is not solitary but is Three-in-One.

To be always seeking relationship is God's very nature, and we, of course, were created in that image.

So to live by faith does not mean we're solo superheroes. It is to share the journey with others. Another thing we might initially conclude from this text is that living by faith means everything works out. But look again. Sure, the list includes some big wins—Abraham, Moses, David—they're all remembered for ultimately being winners. But it starts with Abel, and Abel was killed by his brother. And it ends with almost unspeakable misery for people who lived by faith—torture, imprisonment, bereavement, being stoned to death or sawed in two. All of these people had horrible, horrible things happen in their lives, and yet the author is convinced that they too lived by faith.

Living by faith, then, is something real people—like you and me—do in the midst of real tragedy and heartache. Faith does not fix those things, and perhaps that's a disappointment. It's hard to let go of the idea that if we just believe right, just pray enough, just trust God completely then we won't have to face whatever it is in our lives that breaks our hearts. But Hebrews is very clear that even these people who lost, who endured great pain and died, who grieved and wandered lonely, these too are people who lived by faith.

There are a lot of voices, both secular and religious, that claim that we can escape heartache and tragedy. The secular voices, though loud, are not so difficult to see through—we know deep down that these clothes, this yoga class, that house, none of it will save us. But the religious, even Christian voices, are more dangerous. The voices that say if you just pray then this will not happen, if you just trust then you will be spared - these voices suggest that faith is some sort of magic spell that insulates us from the real world.

But we don't worship a God who's just a glorified magical spell, do we? Again we can turn to Jesus to show us the truth. His way is not a way of avoiding pain and suffering, of being spared the tragedy which comes to all of us at some point. Our savior is the savior who died. No other faith makes such a ludicrous claim—foolish as Paul called it.

To live by faith is to follow the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus. That may mean miraculous amazing powerful things happen. But it also almost certainly means that some really hard things will happen, things we would prefer not to face. To live by faith is to experience the fullness of being a creature of God, and that fullness includes some darkness. To live by faith, by the faith of Jesus, is not to dodge or avoid or try to wish away that darkness, but to walk even into the darkest night with trust.

Trust, because we know it's not the last word, don't we? We know that though the darkness will come, and it may be mighty dark, we have faith that it does not get the last word. To live by faith is ultimately to trust as Jesus did in the joy that is set before us.

We do not walk by faith searching for some quick fix, but for the deep, abiding joy that is within each one of us, every single person, calling us toward God, toward love, toward the way of Christ. When Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they rest in you O God, he knew that it is the joy set before us for which our hearts are longing.

This is the joy that in times of darkness whispers, today may be Friday, but Sunday is a'coming. Weeping may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning. This is the joy for which God created us, the joy which God calls us into each day of our lives.

The author of Hebrews describes the joy that awaits as God's Promised Rest, the Sabbath. When creation is finally fulfilled, we like God, will all rest, no longer groaning as if we were in labor, but resting in our joy. The prophets have been calling us for years, to the mountaintop and beyond, to the land with milk and honey, to the river of life and the tree with healing for the nations in its leaves. But don't think it's just pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. It's here, Jesus said! Look! Within you, among you. It's like treasure in a field, or yeast in bread. It's five loaves and two fish and plenty for all to eat. It's a great feast. It's life! Life! Life abundant! I have come that you may have life. Follow me.

If you can't do it all by yourself, and you yearn for the company of others, if the way is dark right now, and you long for the morning to come, hear this—you are living by faith. You are. In this very moment; and the joy, oh the joy is still there—Jesus is there, calling us forward, bringing us out into a wide, open space with lots of room to dance or run or just rest in the grass, and a great feast for us all. To trust in that rest, that joy that is set before us, that is revealed in our savior Christ, that my friends, is to live by faith. We're on our way, walking by faith.