

August 18, 2019 • 10th Sunday in Kingdomtide

“Now It’s Our Turn”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

This week’s reading from the Letter to the Hebrews picks up where we left off last week. Let’s recap a bit, to make sure that we’re all on the same page, so to speak.

This letter was apparently written to a small congregation of second generation Christians most likely living in Rome or thereabouts, though they remained Greek-speaking into that time. Living in Rome might seem rather glamorous to those of us living now, but it was most assuredly not so for this congregation of Hellenistic Jewish Christians. Affirming Christ as the Messiah put them at odds with both the Jewish community and the Roman Empire.

As a result, for them, life was very hard, even grim. They faced martyrdom. They were subjected to prison and the plundering of their possessions. Most all had experienced hostility, ridicule, and shame. Simply following Jesus, a crucified savior, set them at odds with the surrounding culture. They were vulnerable, marginalized and afraid. Their faith wavered as time went on. Desiring to remain faithful, they could not understand how it was that Christ had not yet returned to save them.

They were vulnerable, too, to social dynamics that will be familiar to us as well. When the world is full of cruelty and hatred, cynicism, fear, apathy, and feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness can take hold of hearts and minds. Honestly, listening to the news these days, aren’t we tempted, as were they, to doubt that justice could ever prevail? How do we respond when compassion has been surpassed by hate-filled disdain of others? What do we do when the well-being and dignity of the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters matters not?

Where do we go, in such times as these? Where do we find solace when hope seems lost? Where do we turn to renew our strength and rise up with wings as eagles?

We turn, as did the early Christians, to the stories of our faith, to those heroes and heroines, whose lives and witness light our path and open for us a new way forward.

Listen: By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

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And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Wow. Do these not inspire us to remain steadfast and to persevere through difficult and dispiriting times?

You know, we now live in a culture that loves super-heroes who perform deeds of power through a force that is beyond human. But note that the "super-heroes and heroines" of Scripture are in fact, ordinary people. Ordinary people with extraordinary faith. Ordinary people like us whose faith and courage come from God.

These ancestors in faith endured much and accomplished marvelous things, all "through faith." It was not through their own "super powers" but through the power of God that they were able to do these amazing things, from crossing the Red Sea on dry land to shutting the mouths of lions and quenching raging fires. They surround us now as the great cloud of witnesses. All these from the witness of Scripture. And all those we meet, here in this congregation, in our community. Those who inspire us to greater commitment and courage.

I recently heard the story of a young man whose story inspires in this same way. Rian Finney is 16 years old. He grew up in West Baltimore, falling asleep every night as a young boy to the sound of what his parents told him was the sound of fireworks. When he was a bit older, they told him the truth. In that tough part of town, every night he was actually hearing gun shots. Falling asleep every night to the sound of gun shots in his neighborhood.

Reflecting back on that time now, as he became aware of the violence all around, he said: "I just felt this sense of, like, fear and anxiety going through my entire body." When you're in survival mode, there's a loss of hope, he says. "It's just an overwhelming sense of nothingness, like I can't do anything."

We can relate, can't we? Just this week's news alone. The gunshots might not literally be in our neighborhood, but they're in every news story we hear. Our ears hear it, our minds try to take it in, and our bodies themselves absorb the anxiety and the fear.

Rian Finney has chosen to respond in an awesome and truly inspiring way, deliberately turning his fear into purpose. He's become involved in groups including "[Good Kids Mad City](#)," which advocates for more safe spaces in the city for teens, and a network of advocates he met this summer at [a Summer Youth Institute](#) at Johns Hopkins. He advocates for changes such as new gun laws and social equality. He's about to begin 11th grade at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute and has interned with a law firm this summer.

Rian Finney, age 16, is now seen as a leader among his peers—motivating others to get involved. He told an interviewer: "If we continually lead people down the path of goodness, then stuff can actually change."

Ordinary young man. Extraordinary faith in the power of each of us to persevere, rise above, and make a difference for good in this world.

A family therapist here at Cedars Sinai explains that the idea that an act of violence could happen anywhere makes us all anxious. But, he asserts, there are strategies to counter the fear—and move forward. "What happens in trauma is we feel helpless," he said. "But if we can find purpose again... we have a path forward and a path to help others."

Find a circle of support. Make time each day for reflection, peace, and gratitude. Speak up. Take some small step. Focus on what you CAN do.

As Christians, we add to that our faith that God's power is working within and through us. God who, "by the power at work with us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine," as we read in the Letter to the Ephesians.

Why don't we take some time each day to breathe in that power, God's power to bring us peace and focus our vision and our purpose? We heard it today in the passage Natalia read for us, reflecting back on all the heroes and heroines of our faith: "Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect." The story is open-ended. We are the next chapter. Now it's our turn.

Amen

Notes:

John C. Shelley in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 3*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010.

Stelian Tofană In *Global Bible Commentary*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004.

Allison Aubrey. "From Pain to Purpose: 5 Ways to Cope in the Wake of Trauma." NPR Morning Edition. August 12, 2019.

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