

Psalm 82

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. I say, "You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince." Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!

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.

I. people of faith without knowledge, people of victorious faith, people of enduring faith, people of faith in death...not perfect faith, but flawed, broken, ugly, difficult, doubting faith, - cloud of witnesses - passing the baton, cheering from the bleachers, calling out our names, and when we beginning to see the hurdles and hazards that are in front of us are too much, we remember that it is perseverance over speed, finding a way to have faith, even as we fight for justice in our lives and the lives of others...

Sermon

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”

With these words, the author of Hebrews begins a conversation about faith that leads right to our text for this morning. Then the whole of chapter 11 looks at the pillars of faith who have come before: Abel, Enoch, and Noah, Abraham and his descendants through Joseph, Moses and the many other heroes of the faith. Each of these men, and the women who are spoken and unspoken within this text - each of them are gold metal winners in the category of faith.

Have you been watching the olympics? It has been on often at our house: swimming, gymnastics, volleyball, and now track and field. They began the preliminary races for the 100m race. This is the race that determines who has the title as the “fastest” man or woman in the world. This is the race where all eyes will be on Usain Bolt from Jamaica. It is a lot of hype for a race that goes in a straight line and takes less than 10 seconds to accomplish. And maybe it is my cross country background, but I’m more excited to see the 3000m steeplechase on Monday and Wednesday. This race is just under two miles in distance, taking olympic runners just around 9 minutes to complete. What is different about this race is that it is not just run around the track, but it also includes overcoming 28 barriers and 7 water pits. There are ups and there are downs and everyone has to go through the water. It is an amazing event and, for me, should get more recognition than it does.

I think the psalmist knew something about going through the water. “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” The poet reminds us that our world is broken - broken systems, broken moments, broken people. I am reminded of a friend of mine who is struggling against injustice in his life. An ordained minister of the church who was fired without cause or reason and then not allowed to plead his case. For a year now he has gone without answers, without compensation, and with hope being taken away from him and his family at every step along the way. And though his story is personal to me, I think many of us know similar stories of injustice, either in our own life or the life of someone we care about. And how can we not cry out, “How long, O God, how long will justice be denied, how long will the wicked find favor?”

I’m reminded that some of you are struggling with injustice and doubt, pain and a loss of hope as well. Some of you feel like the next hurdle, the next barrier, will be insurmountable, the next water hazard may just overwhelm you. And I don’t have any magic words to make everything better for my friend or for some of you. What I do have is the encouragement of these other names of the faith that have been listed: “Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.” Tormented, even killed, “commended for their faith, (they) did not receive what was promised, since God

had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.” These are the witnesses that sit in the grandstands, watching us run our race. Past champions, and people who suffered, men and women of extraordinary faith and extraordinary flaws. And they are standing and cheering us on today.

And what is the race of faith that we are running? At times it is the ability to share time and love with a child or a spouse. At times it is making a connection with a stranger in need. At times it is working to make the world a better place and at times it is making one persons day a little bit nicer through a smile, a hug, or an encouraging conversation. At times it is sharing good news of love and life and faith with anyone and everyone and at times it is allowing God’s faith to carry us over the next barrier or through the waters.

This is not a straight forward race, nor is it one that is only 10 seconds long. This race will have its ups and its downs. And there are some here who think they are past their prime, that they are ready to hang up their tennis shoes and let others who are younger or more faithful continue without them. But I tell you, this is not about being the best, it is about running with perseverance. We keep going because God has not called an end to our race. Shake off the nay sayers who would have you sitting on the sidelines, run with the pain of injustice and heartache while speaking out and sharing with teammate along the path, and look to the grandstands and see the faces of those flawed and faithful people who have come before us. They are cheering for you, they are counting on us to keep the faith, to shake off the sin and to look to Christ for strength, encouragement, and support. We are champions not by being first, nor by being perfect, but by perseverance and grace. Thanks be to God for the great cloud of witnesses, and for the faith to carry on.