

Faith in An Unworthy World

Romans 8:31-39; Hebrews 11:32-12:2

Three years ago, Natalie and I traveled to Greece for a summer hiking vacation, mostly among the ruins of the ancient cities Paul had visited in the book of Acts, but we did take a side trip to a place in the inland mountains called Meteora. This was the place where the Greek Orthodox monks and nuns hid during the centuries when their Greek homeland was overrun by the Ottoman Turks. So in this region, there were beautiful, elaborate monasteries perched on peaks and cliffsides, places that originally could only be reached by rope and ladder, although nowadays ramps and staircases have been built into the mountains to accommodate the tourists.

And I was fascinated to realize that the interior architecture of the Orthodox sanctuaries was actually inspired by the passage you and I have just heard together this morning. So these were octagonal, circular sanctuaries, and the pulpit and altar in these places were in the center of the sanctuary and the congregants stood in a circle facing in towards the priest and Bible and the sacraments and on the walls, in any direction you faced, there were icons, paintings of scenes from the lives of the saints.

It was as if the whole building was designed to say to you, *“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us set aside every weight and entangling sin and let us run with endurance the race set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of the faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and who has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God!”*

The day we were there in that sanctuary, some tour guide was prattling on and on at the altar, so I turned in an odd direction and saw tucked in a corner of the sanctuary a painting of one of the old monks having his throat laid open by a sword, all the graphic details of his violent death faithfully painted into the icon in living color. And it dawned on me that what the monks were communicating with brick and mortar and paint is exactly what the author to the Hebrews puts into words in the passage we’ve read this morning.

That to belong to God and to live for a heavenly kingdom in a world that can go dark and stormy is a high stakes game. For some weeks now, you and I have remembered story after story, character after character who had to bank on pending promises and invisible realities in the face of heartbreak and trial and disappointment that was all too visible and tangible right here and right now. But this morning our passage teaches that it wasn’t all heartbreak and challenge and adversity.

To the contrary, we learn that, in the midst of the shadows, God had used ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things right there and right then in their lifetimes. Our passage tells us that they *“conquered kingdoms and worked justice and obtained promises”*. For weeks I’ve been telling you that Abraham and his descendants found hope and direction in promises from

God that didn't get fulfilled. They waited generation after generation, but this week our passage reminds us that their faithfulness in passing these promises on was not in vain.

There was a century about a thousand years before Christ when every word God spoke to Abraham was literally fulfilled in the here and now. David "*conquered kingdoms*", he really did conquer the entire land that Genesis described as Eden. Everything east of the Nile and west of the Tigris was ruled by God's people just as God had promised Abraham. And David's son, Solomon, really did, in the words of our text, "*work justice*". Under Solomon, Israel became the place where other rulers, near and far, came to study government and philosophy. That's the point of the story of the queen of Sheba. Jerusalem was the envy of all the world's capitals, there and then.

Of course, it didn't last. David and Solomon together ruled a golden era that lasted about 80 years before God's people were back in the soup, holding on to faith and promises in the face of trials and challenges and disappointments. But that doesn't mean that God abandoned them in the here and now. To the contrary, it was often the case that the worse things were, the more wonderful God became.

Our text tells us that God's people "*stopped the mouths of lions*". Of course, this was Daniel the prophet, thrown by the Persians into a hole where they kept lions, starved, desperate and waiting to tear apart anyone who ran afoul of Persian rule.

Our passages teaches that God's people in those days "*quenched the power of fire*". This would have been Daniel's three friends who were thrown by the Babylonians into Nebuchadnezzar's smelting furnace.

They should have lived about a second and a half, just long enough for one long scream, but instead it was Nebuchadnezzar who screamed when he saw Daniel's friends rescued in the flames by, in his words, "*one who looks like a son of the gods!*". Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth individual in the furnace and the church has always thought that what the wicked king saw was Christ come early to save his faithful people in the here and now.

Our passage goes on to tell us of others who by God's providence "*escaped the edge of the sword,*" or, "*were made strong in weakness*". Calvin thinks this last phrase was about good King Hezekiah, who came to the end of his natural life, but his tear stained prayers from his sickbed evoked God's pity, so God sent Isaiah to announce to the king that he would live fifteen more years. Other Israelite kings were desperate and outnumbered in battle but in our passage it teaches "*became mighty in war and bent foreign armies to their will.*"

Our author goes on to remember that, "*Women received back their dead by resurrection.*" This would be the two faithful widows who, each in their turn, protected and provided for the prophets Elijah and Elisha during that desperate era when Ahab and Jezebel ruled Israel. Both women lost sons, who were all they had left in the world, and both saw their sons resurrected by God due to the Elijah and Elisha's prayers.

This pair of stories is poignant in that the widow rescues the prophet so that the prophet can rescue the widow. It's poignant because the ancients saw widows mostly as helpless, objects of pity, but the faith and generosity of these widows unleashes a power that boomerangs back to them from the prophet they rescued. And the point here is that God both can and he often does intervene in the lives of faithful people to bless them with a happy ending in the here and now.

But it's here that our passage makes a long and difficult left turn. It turns out that, for every happy ending certain of God's people enjoyed, there were other incidents where God's people were faithful in the face of trials and challenges that appeared to take them down. Our passage reads, *"Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so to obtain a better resurrection. Others were mocked and beaten, bound in chains and thrown in prison. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they died, murdered by the sword..."*

Israelite tradition has it that Isaiah survived the reign of good King Hezekiah only to be murdered by Hezekiah's son, Manasseh. The wicked young king's secret police found the prophet hiding in a hollow tree in the wilderness and they ordered the tree sawn in half with Isaiah still in it. Calvin guesses that the rest of these stories of torture and imprisonment and martyrdom took place in Palestine just after Alexander and the Greeks conquered Western Asia and tried to force God's people to live like pagans. Many of them were happy to betray the God of their ancestors, but those who wouldn't preserved the faith of Abraham at the cost of their lives.

All in all, the story of the faith of Abraham traveling down almost two thousand years to Christ is a complicated tapestry, woven with all kinds of threads, dark, stormy, bloody stories intertwined with threads of wonder and brilliance and miracles and salvation in the here and now. But our passage teaches that the point of the story, whichever way it turned, was never about them and always about us. *"All these,"* he writes, *"though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised."*

In other words, Abraham and Moses, David and Solomon, Elijah and Elisha and Isaiah, never got to see the One who would die for their sins and rise from the dead to make all their faithfulness, all their sacrifices worthwhile. They held on for something that God didn't even allow them to see. But you and I are different!

We have been told, we have word to the extent any of us care about it that God the Son became one of us to atone for our sins and to unleash the Spirit with power to build his kingdom, starting in our hearts and working its way out through the church and into the hearts and lives and communities of people all around us.

Not a single one of the Old Testament heroes was forgiven and saved and changed by God *"apart from us"* our passage teaches. The point being that the shadows and clouds and blood as

well as the wonders and brilliance and miracles belong to us every bit as much here and now as it belonged to the ancients who experienced it there and then.

Last month, in a used book store, I found a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young Lutheran theologian and pastor who was martyred by the Nazi's just weeks before the Russians overran Hitler's bunker in Berlin. Bonhoeffer was complicated both as a theologian and a man. He was remarkable in that he had escaped Germany in 1939, was all set up to teach theology in safety at Union Seminary in New York City. Everything a young Christian scholar could want was there including big, active, busy, successful churches with every kind of ministry and fellowship a young man could want.

His reaction? I gotta get outta here! This is for the birds! I've got to go back where the suffering is real and lives are at stake and decisions really matter! Within weeks, he was on a ship which would get him back to Germany in time for the invasion of Poland which would land his life in an ethical soup where he would have to work within the Abwehr, German foreign intelligence, as a pastor to sustain the underground church and as an agent trying to under-mine the Nazi regime. All this in a disguise that confused his friends and his enemies alike.

It turns out that Christ himself took that long left turn toward suffering that so many of the Old Testament saints had to take before him. In the Garden, he asked his Father for a reprieve, "*Let this cup pass me by!*", Jesus prayed through tears and sweat, but he added in what must have been something close to despair "*yet not my will but yours be done*". He was God the Son but at that moment he was one of us, we all want to bask in the light of brilliance, we all want a life marked by wonders and miracles and rescues.

Our author remembers Christ's left turn here because he is writing to Christians who were tempted to abandon gospel and church for ministries that taught them to seek disciplines and rituals and experiences that would leave them the masters of their destiny and not the servants of a God to whom they owed all their love and absolute obedience. Once winning and popularity, once mastery and success become our measure, we are no longer following the One "*who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame and who has sat down at the right hand of God.*"