

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
August 19, 2007

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Hope for the Journey

image of journey
How is it we find this hope?

Hebrews

placed with epistles (letters) but is more sermon or exhortation
attributed at times to Paul, but is not Pauline in style, close associate
between 60 and 95 C.E.

purpose—encouragement

second-generation community that experienced persecution
perhaps disappointed that God's realm had not been fulfilled,
some may have begun to abandon the community

chapter 12:1-2 are a single sentence—"therefore, since we are..."
Greek – let us keep on running

Persevere—keep on running

how—prime example is Jesus, who endured the cross
other clouds of witnesses as well

Therefore since WE are surrounded, let US run the race
not isolated individuals, but in community

Image—coliseum, stadium

filled with spectators, but these are special spectators
have already run the race, know what we are going through
cheering us on

who are the witnesses in your life?
who has run the race before you?

Image—relay race and passing of the baton

"We're always building on the work of other people."

Mel Leventhal—"Hope Dies Last"

Months before Rosa Parks—high school student was arrested and
thrown off the bus, beaten up and thrown in jail

Frances Moore Lappe *Diet for a Small Planet*

"Hope is not for wimps; it's for the strong-hearted
who can recognize how bad things are and yet not be deterred,
not be paralyzed."

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most powerful witness in her life—
being daughter of parents who were courageous
lay people founded Unitarian church in Texas during McCarthy
era—being Unitarian meant being communist

Wangari Masai--grew up in a small Kenyan village, became the first female Ph.D. in biological sciences in East Africa

Wangari became acutely aware of the encroaching desert. Trees were being felled much, much faster than they were being planted. So on Earth Day 1977, she planted 7 trees. Then she began to realize that it would take millions of villagers planting trees all over the country to begin to reverse the ecological decline. So she went to the government foresters and said, "We need millions of people planting trees." They said, "No, no, it takes foresters to plant trees." That did not deter her. Wangari started a nursery in her own house, growing little saplings. Her husband thought it made for a messy house, so he divorced her. That did not deter her. She ended up creating a village-based movement of women. There are now 60,000 of these tree nurseries, run by village women who have planted 20 million trees throughout Africa.

WHO HAS RUN THE RACE BEFORE YOU?
WHO IS RUNNING THE RACE WITH YOU?

Fred Craddock, a pillar of American preaching in the last few decades, tells this story about a cloud of witnesses. He writes:

Before I was married I served a little mission in the Appalachians. It was the custom in that church at Easter to have a baptismal service. My church immerses and this baptismal service was held in Watts Bar Lake on Easter Evening at Sundown. Out on a sandbar, I, along with the candidates for baptism, moved into the water, and after we were done we came on shore where the little congregation was gathered singing around the fire and cooking supper.

They had constructed little booths for changing clothes, with blankets hanging. They went in and changed clothes and went to the fire, and finally last of all, I went over and changed clothes and went to the fire.

Once we were all around the fire, Glen Hickey, always Glen, introduced the new people, gave their names, where they lived, and their work.

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Then the rest of us formed a circle around them while they stayed warm at the fire. The ritual was each person in the circle gave his or her name and then said this: "My name is...and if you ever need somebody to do the washing and ironing." "My name is...and if you ever need somebody to chop wood." "My name is...and if you ever need anybody to baby-sit." "My name is...and if you ever need anybody to repair your house for you." "My name is...and if you ever need a car to go to town."

And around the circle it went. Then we ate. Then Percy Miller, with thumbs in his bibbed overalls, would stand and say, "its time to go." Everybody left, and he lingered behind and with his big shoe kicked sand over the dying fire.

At my first experience of that, writes Craddock, Percy saw me standing there. He looked at me and said, "Craddock, folks don't ever get any closer than this."

In that little community they have a name for that, says Craddock. I've heard it in other communities too, in that community their name for that is church. They call that church.

You see around that campfire, those newly baptized in the faith, were surrounded by two great clouds of witnesses, one in the heavens above, that great cloud of witnesses cheering and clapping, Moses giving David a high five, Samson lifting Barak and Gideon and Rahab on his shoulders.

But also, those newly welcomed into the faith were surrounded by another great cloud of witnesses cheering them on, and they were the members of that small congregation, encircling them around the fire.

So the preacher in Hebrews says, run the race of faith, remembering the baton of faith has been passed to you, realizing you do not run alone.

Then the preacher says one final thing. He says, unlike Enoch and Abraham and Noah and Moses, we have one advantage.

He says even though the whole assembly of faithful ancestors is lined up as far as the eye can see, "yet," he says, "even though they were commended for their faith, they did not receive what was promised."

And on that sentence the entire letter to the Hebrews rocks back and forth.

You see in the preacher's mind we not only have this great cloud of witnesses that encourage us down the road of faith, but also, we have

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learned, we have seen, we have sung, how the lead runner in this race is none other than Jesus himself.

He is the pioneer of our faith, says Hebrews. He is the one who sets the course, says the preacher. He is the one who shows us how to run. He is the one who teaches us how to handle the long hills, how to get a second wind when the going gets hard because we know that in his life, he endured fatigue, pain, discouragement, suffering. He endured the cross. He, of all people, knows how we feel. And that's the good news of the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus of all people leads the way. Jesus of all people, not only applauds from the sidelines, but runs this race of faith by our very side.

Perhaps you caught it on television. But do you remember the 1996 Olympics? An American runner, Derek Redmond, ran in the 400 meter race. For years and years he had practiced with his father as his trainer and coach.

However, during his heat, Redmond was well out in front of the pack when his Achilles tendon snapped. He stopped running but did not drop out of the race. In a struggling limp he pulled himself forward, dragging his wounded leg behind him.

The crowd stood and cheered the wounded runner on, but the pain was so great and the wound so serious that it was doubtful he could make it.

Suddenly, a middle aged man jumped over the guardrail onto the track, caught up with Derek, put his arms around his waist, and helped him all the way to the finish line. At first people were worried who this person was. A spectator. And then a commentator realized it was Derek's father!

When the race was over, Redmond told the press, "He was the only one who could have helped me, because he was the only one who knew what I'd been through."

And so, says the preacher, know the God of heaven comes down alongside each of us as we walk, stumble, crawl, and run this race of faith. And know that the God of heaven understands what we've been through, what we are going through, and what lies ahead of us.

Therefore, says the preacher, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.