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Who Are 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. ³⁰ **By faith** the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ **By faith Rahab** the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient,^[m] because she had received the spies in peace.

³² 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,** ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two;^[n] they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹ **Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised,** ⁴⁰ 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,^[a] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of^[b] 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.

Recently, Jane Chou and I visited Ed Stilwell,
at 96, he is the oldest member of our combined church,
having been a member of LPC for 65 years—
a congregation that his Father led as pastor for many years!

Ed is a treasure to talk with.
When we arrived,

he was looking for his perfect attendance pin from church in 1939—
 he earned that at age 10, and is so proud of it!
 He told us about riding in the family car to church every week,
 and his father growing the church from just a few people to over 100 members
 when they joined the Presbytery.

***Ed is one of the Stilwells from this area of Holmdel and Matawan—
 his ancestors came from England.***

His grandfather owned a popular general store,
 and he and his family have been an integral part of the community.
 Ed has been a public servant all his life,
 and served as a volunteer firefighter in Holmdel for 75 years!

You know what else is amazing?

Our silver baptismal font was given to this church
 in 1869 by his ancestor, Mrs. Elizabeth Stillwell,
 in memory of her mother, the wife of Rev. Charles Webster.
 It survived the 1955 fire on Main Street.
 When Ed saw it and heard the story about it from our book
 “*Presbyterians Pioneer at Matawan*”, he cried.

I recently had 2 occasions to be with my Dad’s family—

in Missouri, with my Aunt, sister and 3 cousins,
 and in Oklahoma at a family barn dance last weekend.
 The most amazing part of our big family
 (I have about 100 cousins on my Dad’s side) is not just gathering,
 it’s also fellowship over meals,
 and sharing stories of life on the family farm.
 We always find so many similar struggles, dreams and goals.
 Thankfully my Aunt Judy is still alive,
 and she is passing down stories for us to keep in our hearts.

***What’s even more meaningful is the legacy of Christian faith
 in many of our relatives—***

people who grew up attending the little country Church of the Brethren.
 This legacy means that we always have more in common than DNA—
 we have a connection through our faith in Jesus Christ.

***I wonder, what YOU have discovered in your own family?
 And what have you learned about this CHURCH family?***

Such discoveries are not just interesting,
they have the potential to transform our lives,
encourage our values, and strengthen our purpose.

Don't we all want to be a part of a BIGGER story?

In the book of Hebrews,
we learn that we are part of a ***much bigger story!***

Today's reading continues the Hall of Faith found in Hebrews 11.

It is a fascinating list of lesser-known Biblical heroes and ancestors--
Rahab, Gideon, Barak and Samson just to name a few.
The original audience of this book would have known them well—
so we should spend time getting to know them too!

Most of them are found in the books of Joshua and Judges.

You may remember the story of Rahab.

In the book of Joshua, Chapter 2, Rahab is a pagan prostitute from Jericho.
She hides two Israelite spies from the king of Jericho and helps them escape,
saving her own family from the destruction that follows,
when Joshua conquers the city and the walls of Jericho fall down.
She ties a red cord in her window,
enabling Joshua's men to find her family, and save them all.
She is a true hero.

In Judges, Chapters 6 to 8,
we find the story of ***Gideon***,
who was called by God to deliver the Israelites from the Midianites.
With the help of the Lord, they conquer them with a vastly outnumbered force.
Gideon had so many doubts about his call from God,
that he kept asking God for a 'sign'!
Any of that sound familiar?
Doubting God's call? Asking for a sign?
Maybe YOU'VE even been there?

The story of Barak is found in the Book of Judges, chapters 4 and 5.

Barak was a military leader who worked alongside the prophetess Deborah.
He led the Israelite army to a victory over Canaanite forces led by Sisera.
God brought a storm that turned the battlefield into mud---
disabling Sisera's chariots, and leading to an Israelite victory.

In Judges 13-16, we find the story of Samson.

He was called at birth, and given supernatural strength,
but only if his hair was never cut.

He defeats the Philistines several times,
and demonstrates his strength by tearing a lion apart with bare hands,
using the jawbone of a donkey to kill a thousand men.

***His downfall comes when his wife Delilah is bribed
to find the source of his strength,***

and he reveals the secret of his hair.

When his hair is cut, he loses his strength,
and is imprisoned by the Philistines who blind him, and imprison him,
until he takes down their temple, killing himself and hundreds of them.

***Hebrews 11 talks about these and many other heroes of our faith,
'of whom the world is not worthy'—***

people who had great faith,
but did not receive what was promised,
because God has something better, for them, and us...
which leads us to wonder how we, today,
fit into this story as followers of Jesus.

What do you hear in stories like these?

How can these heroes inspire you and I to be more faithful?

To stay close to Jesus?

To follow in their footsteps?

I wonder, who are the heroes of faith in YOUR life?

Who introduced you to faith?

Who has inspired you?

Whose faith do you imitate?

***When we get to Hebrews Chapter 12,
we see that Jesus is the fulfillment of all God's promises,
he is the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith'.***

We are called to follow him in the race of faith,
laying aside every weight and sin,
so that we can run with perseverance.

***Jesus has gone before us in this race of faith—
and he did it ‘for JOY set before him’.***

It was JOY that led him to endure the pain and humiliation of the cross.

He did it all out of love.

He did it all for us.

I wonder, what does that mean to you?

And did you notice something ELSE amazing?

As we run, we are surrounded—by all the saints before us!

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses!

That cloud of witnesses are people who have traveled this road before

And now bring us encouragement to keep going when our times are tough!

Don’t we need that—RIGHT NOW?

Who is in YOUR cloud of witnesses?

Who are the saints who inspire you?

Who is cheering you on?

In April 2023 we participated in the Matawan Tour of Churches.

We celebrated over 300 years of church history—

from the church near 79 and 516 before the revolutionary war,

to the one on Main street that burned in 1955,

to the current structure from 1957.

In that presentation, we had dramatic interpretations of the Rev. Charles McKnight who was kidnapped by the British after preaching against the crown, and we heard from other ministers

about the legacy of faith in this church and community.

If you get a chance, read *Presbyterians Pioneer at Matawan*,

it’s a fascinating account of the history of this church.

But the truth is, the WHOLE BIBLE is our family album.

It’s our ancestry.com.

The Biblical ancestors are our people.

If we want to find stories that inspire, encourage, and uplift us,

we need look no further than The Bible!

We need this encouragement—especially in 2025.

We might feel that the times we are living in are the WORST of times.

That our challenges are uniquely difficult and hurtful.

But Hebrews reminds us that people of faith

have always faced challenges and difficulty!

When we feel that standing up for what is right is difficult in 2025,
we can be inspired by those who have gone before us and stood up for truth.

Jill Duffield writes in Connections Commentary,
***“While we may never be asked to choose God over persecution,
we are daily faced with choosing God over lesser loyalties.
We must examine our budgets and social media posts,
our relationships and the ones we lack,
and question whether or not we are looking to Christ and looking like Christ.***
Pg. 246, Connections, Year C Vol. 3.

I encourage you this week—to think about this:

Who are YOUR faith heroes?

If they are alive, have you told them that? Have you thanked them?

If they have passed on—you can still thank them, and thank God for them!

***Let’s also think about our ANCESTORS in the Bible—
and try to learn more about them.***

Start with Hebrews 11, Google some of them—find their stories and learn more.

Let them inspire you, and inspire US as a church!

Let’s imagine them lining the road of this race we are running—
cheering us on, telling us to keep going!

***And let’s find the strength and encouragement to stand up for truth,
To stand up for those without a voice.***

There are terrible things happening around us.

There is so much hatred. So much corruption.

And so many are turning a blind eye.

Let’s find the strength to stand firm in the face of trouble,
in our lives, in our community, and in our church.

And most of all, let us find strength from JESUS himself.

Who for the sake of JOY endured the cross, and it’s shame—

All for us.

He did it out of love, for us.

And because he did that, we have the strength to keep going,

And to find that same JOY.

May God fill us with inspiration, encouragement and hope

As we look to the cloud of witnesses,

And to our heroes of faith.

And for the gift of faith, all God's people can say together, Amen.