



Roanoke, Virginia

August 14, 2022

“A God Nearby”

Jeremiah 23:23-24 and Hebrews 11:29-12:2

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Note: This sermon was preached on the Sunday of church member Mia Copeland’s baptism. Some points in the sermon reference that event.

We don’t know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. But its purpose seems clear. Some 30 or so years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, this community of Jewish believers needed encouragement and direction. Living in a Roman occupied state, most likely ostracized from their synagogues and families, they needed the reminder that they were not alone. In fact, the author says, they stand in a long line of God’s faithful people throughout Hebrew scriptures all the way to Jesus himself.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, 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— ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They 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—³⁸of 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, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

12 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, ²looking 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.

Jeremiah 23:23-24. Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? ²⁴Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD.

Faith. It's a big word in our passage from Hebrews. Consider how you might define it. What does faith mean to you? It is more a verb than a noun, isn't it? If I were asked to describe it to children, I might say that faith looks a lot like trust.

Soren Kierkegaard described faith as a leap—a leap of trust—a leap of faith—into the unknown.

I'm reminded of a storyⁱ about a father and daughter during the Blitz in WWII London. The two were caught without shelter in a dangerous night of bombing. Seeking any safe space, the father dove into a pit, and testing that the hole wasn't filled with water, he called up to his young daughter to jump down to him. Unable to see into the darkness, the girl hesitated. The father cried out, "I know it's dark and you can't see me—but I can see you! Jump, and I will catch you." In faith, the little girl dove into the darkness, caught in the safety and security of her father's familiar arms.

Faith. It's not always so easy, is it? It can be scary. It can be hard. You can't have it without doubt. It waxes and wanes within us, it shapes and molds the decisions we make – the people we become. It requires something of us. It is hard to define, hard to make grow on our own, impossible to impose on someone else.

Hebrews clearly feels it's important.

The author of Hebrews helps describe what it's looked like for God's people across the ages. He offers a sort of faith hall of fame to help add flesh and bone and stories to its meaning.

Walking down the aisle, we have Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. On the other side, Joshua and Rahab at Jericho just after the walls came a-tumbling. There's Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel and the prophets. If we were walking the Hebrews hall of



faith, there would be biblical giants then and now, on our left and on our right, as far as the eye could see.

At first glance, the hall is full of scenes of triumph: conquering enemies, obtaining promises, shutting the mouths of lions, even gaining victory over death. But when we look closer, there is also suffering in these stories: public mocking, imprisonment, beating, stoning, homelessness, violence, and death. These characters, held as examples of faith in their fullness, side by side, seem impossible to reconcile. Triumph and suffering—these are two categories we don't like to mix. After all, our culture says we are either winners or losers.

Sadly, it is often preached that faith looks a lot like winning. A lot of pastors and churches emphasize the things you can overcome with faith, like it's some magic tonic. They describe the world that will open up to you, if you only trust that it's there for the taking. They say things like "name it and claim it," or "You're the only thing standing in your own way," "live your best life now." And as one famous televangelist in TX claims, "There is a winner in you. You were created to be successful...."

But often times, faith in God doesn't really look or even feel like winning. Often times, faith in God looks a lot like the opposite. Moses was a murderer who fled the Pharaoh's court—he was slow of tongue and quick to anger. The Israelites doubted him, doubted God, at many points along their way. Rahab was a sex worker who sold out her city. Samson was vain. David was a womanizer who had a deeply conflicted relationship with God.

Hebrews isn't giving us a cast of sinless saints. This letter isn't about being champions for God; rather, it's speaking the truth about what it means to be a human redeemed by grace. It's offering an important word about the life of faith. Because the life of faith is hard. The life of faith is risky. And the life of faith never guarantees us health, wealth, prosperity, and safety. To suggest otherwise would be untrue.

Some people see faith as victory, but the author of Hebrews includes the faithful who were not just victors—but people who wrestled with their faith, who followed God into deserts, trusted there would be a way when there was no way, who lived in caves and holes, and were imprisoned and stoned to death.

The late, great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, "The world has two ways of getting rid of Jesus. The first is by crucifying him; the second is by worshiping him without following him."

Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry says that in one sense, it's pretty easy to worship Jesus on a Sunday, but it is something else entirely to follow Jesus out there in the world on Monday.ⁱⁱ It's pretty painless and easy to become a member of a church in America. All you have to do is show up, answer a few questions, and maybe attend some new member classes—it's not complicated.



But a life of faith—a life of faith is much more difficult and demanding a proposition. Particularly in an era when other people and groups claim the name Christian but don't reveal any gifts of the Spirit in love, peace, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.

Discipleship is about following Jesus—living by the teachings he actually taught—and leaning on the side of grace in our everyday lives. As we know, that is far easier said than done.

A few moments ago, we stood together and shared the words of faith in the Apostles' Creed. The earliest and most ancient of Christian creeds. Its lines stem from an early baptismal creed. Words that must not have simply rolled off the tongues of new converts. For many, choosing to follow in the Way meant that they were being cast out of synagogues and even families for affirming their faith in Jesus.

A confirmation student once asked me years ago why we stand when we recite the Apostles' Creed. Certainly, something of that stems from respect for the words we're saying and the meaning and tradition behind them. But I wondered then, as I do now, whether standing together—in body and spirit—helps us get through the words we are confessing. Because in the life of faith, there may be seasons when those words are easy to rattle off with confidence. But there may also be seasons when certain words or phrases come with difficulty—if they come at all. Standing together, in our faith and our doubt, our voices speak out for those who feel the faith strongly, and those who aren't sure they can feel it at all. Perhaps we stand and recite the words in unison because we cannot truly ever mean them on our own—we cannot truly ever be a Christian on our own.

Hebrews says, “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses....” It's a reminder that we are not alone. Jesus has pioneered the way of faith for us, and countless women and men have gone ahead through the millennia, shaping the path for us to follow. Their stories—stories of triumph and sorrow, gain and loss, trust and doubt—offer us both comfort and accountability. We are surrounded by witnesses whose testimonies both console and challenge us. We are surrounded by witnesses whose stories must nuance and deepen our own. It's incredible how faith is somehow our own, yet also profoundly communal.

As Presbyterians, we don't have private baptisms. Because in every baptism, the community of faith plays a role. We are asked to guide and nurture, by word and deed, with love and prayer, the one being baptized. We vow to encourage that one to know and follow Christ as a faithful member of Christ's Church. We remember every baptism where we've made such promises, and we become a part of that cloud—with all our faith and doubt, our good work and our good intentions—we become a part of Mia's cloud she carries with her as she goes about the business of her every ordinary day.

It is tough to follow Jesus. Even some of his closest and most trusted friends struggled to follow where he led. We need each other to guide and nurture in love and prayer. We need each other to forgive, encourage, and welcome in.



And so I wonder, who are the imperfect saints you carry with you? What saints and sinners stand with you—in body or spirit—when you affirm the words of faith? Who do you take with you when you head to work or school or set about your chores on Monday morning? Those folks in that crowd of witnesses, they're not perfect—none of us is. God never asks for our perfection.

Throughout the story of God's people, God sends messages, reminders that we are never truly alone.

“Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off?” God's message to the people through Jeremiah was a reminder—a reminder of how often we behave as though God were not right beside us. How often we speak, live, work, and vote as though God could not see us. How often we live like we are our own person.

It's far too easy to forget about this “cloud” in our daily lives. Living as we do in a culture that worships individualism, it's easy to assume, to feel like we're alone, unseen, and unfettered by our spiritual life. But we aren't alone; we're surrounded. Christianity is not about me and my personal Jesus, doing our own private thing together. Ours is a profoundly communal faith, one that spans place, culture, race, ethnicity, and time.

Faith is an act of courage. It is a leap into the unknown that we are never asked to take all on our own. God never promised this way would be easy, only that we would never go alone. I am glad and grateful to walk this way with you.

ⁱ I cannot find the source for this story, but believe it was in an introduction to a PW Horizon's Bible study years ago.

ⁱⁱ The Most Rev. Michael Curry, “Keep the Faith” a sermon for Day1, August 18, 2013: https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003635/keep_the_faith

