

“ENCOURAGEMENT AND HOPE”

Rev. Dr. Floyd W. Churn

August 15, 2010

Scripture: Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

²⁹By 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.

³²And 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. ³⁹Yet 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, apart from us, be made perfect.

¹²Therefore, 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.

It's been over ten years now since I stopped dropping off rolls of exposed film at the quickie print center for developing...as I suspect most of you now view your photographs on a computer screen and print out only a very few to frame or maybe mount in an paste-in photo binder album, an increasingly rare commodity. Instead of getting out the old album with its brittle pages and cracked plastic protectors and those photo mounting corners, families will more likely be gathering around screens as big as the 52-inch flat screen or as tiny as the 1.5" X 2" iPod to view the latest episodes and newest members of the family. These "virtual" albums on your hard drive or CD, of course, contain only the latest family history, the last decade or two. To see Great-grandma Loretta's sweet smile, or ne'er-do-well Uncle Bill's mischievous grin, mysterious older cousin Suzanne, a mid 1950's home-coming queen, Grandpa Ernie with his ever-present El Producto cigar...or the old homestead with the horseshoe pitch and the brick barbeque by the walnut tree – for these, unless you've scanned, you have to get out the old family album with its brittle, yellowing pages and some come-loose photos that were once lovingly mounted. You can track back from the newer digitals, to those when you first got that good 35mm Pentax, through the somewhat grainer and now slightly fading Instamatic 125 and 110 era, to the old black and whites with scalloped borders you got developed at the local drugstore in a little mini-album, shot with the Kodak Brownie or the old box camera.

There is much family history in photo albums: the people and the places, the triumphs and the crises, the new babies and the old matriarchs and patriarchs, the continuity and the change that, strung together, portray a family. Old pictorial directories from 25 or 30 years ago can be fascinating for a church family to page through: “Did he ever really look like that – what a handsome devil!?” “What ever happened to that Edmundson family?” “Look, that hair...Jack was a real hippie back then.” “Why, that’s the youth who was always getting into trouble, now Vice President of the World Bank!” “Oh no...that’s me 30 years younger and 30 pounds lighter.”

Whether it’s looking at old albums, or sharing memorable family stories at a funeral or wedding, recalling getting through difficult times, remembering and maybe romanticizing family Christmas gatherings, or calling up faces of those who played a role in shaping our family history for better or worse – much of what we are is wrapped up in our family album.

And so it was for the Hebrew Christians who were struggling to establish and solidify their faith-family-identity in this young movement; they were pulled in at least 2 directions: they were Hebrews, with all the religious heritage and practice of the Hebrew faith...but they were also Christian, centered around Jesus Christ, a Hebrew who had come with a universal message of salvation for all, who violated some ancient Jewish traditions and crossed religious boundaries frequently and said, “You have heard...but I say to you.” And... these Hebrew Christians were exhausted. As Tom Long writes in the introduction to his commentary on Hebrews:

“The Preacher...is addressing a real and urgent problem, one that seems astonishingly contemporary...His congregation...is tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing confidence. The threat of this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere...Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.”ⁱ

The writer of this letter takes at least two tacks to try to help them restore their once-vibrant faith: he reminds them, in some highly complex Hebrew theological terms, about who this Jesus Christ is...*and*, he reminds them of their family of family and what that means for their present and their future. The first 10 chapters focus upon the nature and work of Jesus Christ, their “great high priest” – a sympathetic priest, tempted in every way as they, but without sin. And then, beginning in chapter 11, after a quickie definition of faith, he connects these weary Hebrew Christians to the great chain of faith, the great family who lived by faith but didn’t get to experience the One toward whom all of this family heritage was moving and cresting: Jesus the Christ. He does it by giving them their family album to consider...family snapshots in the great gallery of faith...ancestors whose faith lives in their faith, now fulfilled in Jesus. He turns the page that shows their ancestors crossing the Red Sea, from slavery to freedom; there’s Joshua, who marched around Jericho until the walls fell and the family moved into the Promised Land. Yes, and Rahab, though a prostitute, who courageously prepared the way for the Promised Land scouting party. And turn through the pages to see Gideon, Barak, look – Samson and David and Samuel and those persistent prophets, always living on the edge of the mainstream: there the ancestors are, conquering kingdoms, administering justice, obtaining promises, shutting the mouths of lions (remember old Uncle Daniel? – there he is).

Draw strength, the writer/Preacher is urging, from those who brought about and lived through the **triumphs** of faith...the high points and the breakthroughs, and the nation and community building, the maintenance of proper worship and the establishment of social justice. All by faith. But draw strength as well from those who by faith **overcame adversity**, the intrepids who had to face public mocking, imprisonment, flogging, homelessness, poverty, isolation, and yes, some even paid the ultimate price but died in faith, not futility. A family album of spiritual victories and triumphant mountaintops – but also the perseverance of those who by faith endured, found the spiritual resources to get through the darkest, most painful occasions and seasons of life. They forged this family of faith, he says, of which you, Hebrew Christians, are the current generation. But you have more: you have seen God’s ultimate promise delivered in Jesus Christ and in him, you have seen where this family journey is heading *and* how it will end.

Here is your encouragement, he tells them. And we too learn about faith from this family photo album. We, like they, are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We too remember and draw strength from those who have preceded us...those who have accomplished breakthroughs, led the church into new insights, built up the body of Christ, took bold stands on behalf of freedom and justice – but also those from whom we draw strength by their *endurance* and *courage* in facing adversity, illness, rejection, and loss. We would include in our great family album cloud of witnesses those 16th and 17th –century reformers who reset the direction of the church toward God’s grace, God’s sovereignty, the priesthood of all believers, and the centrality of scripture. And we would also include those of our local congregations, past and present members of Woods or other church families who nurtured us, whose lives showed us the way of faith, conviction, compassion, and courage. There may be other congregations that have columbaria right in their sanctuaries, but I have not known of any: what a strong visible witness to that great cloud of the faithful who have preceded us and who symbolically but in a real sense uphold the corners of our structure, our present support in this time of change and new possibility, and in every season of church life.

Well, it’s almost inevitable that the writer to the Hebrews has to jump to a new metaphor to describe the role this cloud of witnesses plays in our faith. He moves us to a sports arena where a critically important race is taking place, a relay race. And they back then, now we are the runners in this long-distance race; we are not passive tourists on a leisurely stroll through life, collecting souvenirs and visiting landmarks. We are runners, and it’s not a 50-yard dash...it’s a race for the long haul, the endurance run. But it’s the right race; too easily we find ourselves running the wrong race, the pursuit of status – the rat race. But as William Sloane Coffin reminded us: Even if you win the rat race, you’re still a rat. This is the race of our true identity. What do we need to run it faithfully? We need *encouragement* and we need *hope*.

And where do we find the encouragement? It’s that huge cheering section, rooting us on. Those who have run previous legs of this relay race and have now handed the baton to us...to us individually...to us as Christ’s body in this present moment. They are in the grandstand, as it were, a reminder that “*We* did it by God’s grace through faith,” and you too can run without falling by the wayside in weariness and discouragement. As the great hymn about the saints reminds us, “*We* feebly struggle, they in glory shine!” But our struggles are made easier by the encouragement of their shining faces, snapshots of courage and determination.

These saints...our mothers and fathers and grandparents and forebears in the faith (all who name and claim Christ and allow Christ to claim them are saints)...those who brought the faith to this land...who show us how to be reformed and always reforming...who steered the course of

church history and walked the pages of the Bible following Christ and in centuries leading up to him... who planted a congregation here in rural Severna Park just shy of a hundred years ago... All these, imperfect though they all were, are the communion of saints, our encouragement.

But we also need *hope* to run the race of faith. Our cloud of witnesses surrounds us, on our left and right, cheering us on. We also, however, need to have before us the goal to which we are running. What's the finish line? It is Jesus Christ, the "pioneer and perfecter" of our faith, the Preacher calls him. That is, Jesus is both behind us as the author, the initiator of our faith and ahead as the End, the perfecter, in whose resurrection we see what God intends for human life, and that the race's end is Life, not death. We need a true and energizing vision of the end to make our way in hope through the present; in theological terms, we need an *eschatology*, a belief about last things, how it all comes out, to deal redemptively and beneficially with the things of today, the agonies and ecstasies, the tug and pull that we know on the way.

We too, like the Hebrew Christians, find ourselves all-too-often with drooping hands and weak knees, and sometimes we too limp along with crippled spirits. We get weary and discouraged, and wonder if it's worth the time and energy to keep on keepin' on in this journey or race of faith. Well, in such times, as I happily mix metaphors – let's remember our company, scan through the family album, listen for the cheering from the stands...and look to the One who has finished the race, crossed the finish line in his rising from the tomb, and who beckons us on: the one hope of our calling – God's love in Jesus Christ our Lord.

ⁱ Thomas G. Long, Hebrews, in *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 3.