

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

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Heb. 11:29-12:2

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18 August 2019

We've had some lovely surprises this week at Holy Cross, haven't we?! It's not every day that we can say that a substantial gift has come to our church and our ministry as we saw it happen this week.

And just at the right moment also, isn't it? We've known for some time that we had quite a steep hill to climb to address the growing building needs here and at the same time do what we can to get us back to full-time ministry. It's been a challenge. A big challenge. A challenge that has needed every member to participate and do what he or she can. And, God bless you all, you've all made a significant effort to do your part. I thank you for that.

But many of us have been worried, haven't we? Staring at a \$280,000 capital campaign is a daunting thing when it comes to setting our building and our ministry on sound footing. Even if we understand the numbers and understand how it can work, it's still a daunting thing. I don't doubt that many of us have been feeling rather small in the face of such a big number.

So the news of a significant gift to kick off this campaign is not only a big surprise, it's a huge blessing, isn't it? Suddenly the goal doesn't seem so out of reach. And not just the NUMBER goal, but the whole goal of getting back to full-time ministry and fixing up our building ahead of next year's 50th anniversary.

Should we have been so surprised though? Have we not been seeing some pretty regular surprises and blessings around here over the past couple of years? Yes, indeed we have. And in many ways, our second lesson from the Letter to the Hebrews speaks directly to that today.

That reading began last week with that great definition of faith that I preached about from chapter 11, verse 1. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

As I said it last week, faith is about trust – trusting completely in God. Faith is about belief – belief that God truly is in control and has a plan for us. Faith is about following – following where God is leading, because when God leads, all things good are before us. Including surprises and blessings.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews goes on in chapter 11 to tell of so many people who had such faith and such hope, and how it sustained them through their lives.

By faith, Abel made sacrifice to God and was counted "as righteous" before God. By faith, Enoch was taken up into heaven and "did not experience death"

because “he had pleased God.” This is critical, says the writer of the letter, because “without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Does that not sound like what I have been preaching since I came to you two years ago? “Be faithful, and you will be blessed,” I’ve said. Have faith and be faithful, just like it says on our sanctuary walls, and you will be blessed. That’s precisely what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is saying.

This letter is one of the greatest letters of the whole New Testament as it talks about faith and about how to walk in faith, especially chapters 11 and 12.

We heard last week about Abraham, who by faith “obeyed when he was called to set out ... not knowing where he was going.” Yet he went on faith. And his faith was not in vain, for he was eventually blessed with a son and descendants “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

In later verses of chapter 11, the letter tells of Moses, hidden by the faith of his parents when he was a baby, even though the pharaoh’s edict called for the killing of all male Hebrew babies. By faith, that baby grew up in the pharaoh’s household, and yet when a man he chose to be part of the hard life of the Hebrew slaves, “for he was looking ahead to the reward” that would come from faith, says the letter.

By faith, Moses led the Hebrew people to keep “the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn of Egypt would not touch the firstborn of Israel.” By faith, Moses led the people “through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned.”

“By faith,” says the letter, “the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies [of Israel] in peace.”

All stories of unexpected happenings. All stories from scripture of things promised and blessings delivered to those who had faith.

That’s where our lesson for today picks up and speaks of so many more people of faith – “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.”

And all – ALL – had one thing in common. Faith in God. Faith that was “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith that sustained them in the face of adversity and fears. Faith that strengthened them and made them MORE than they could have ever been by themselves.

And these are only the BIBLICAL examples of faith that the Letter to the Hebrews addresses. We here at Holy Cross have nearly 50 years of faith stories that continue to inspire us to this day.

By faith, a handful of Christians in the newly established community of Spring Hill gathered in early 1969 to express interest in forming a Lutheran Church. By faith, they chose the name “Holy Cross,” believing that the cross would lead them to the promise of a Church in this place.

By faith, they joined with Pastor Frederick Haer to make calls in the community and develop the congregation. By faith, they broke ground and built this very building that we sit in today, dedicating it in June of 1970.

By faith, these founding members of Holy Cross called the Rev. William Johnson, who answered that call in faith and joined the effort to build up this church. By faith, prayer and 22 years of hard work, these early members built all the buildings that we now enjoy, going into massive debt to pay for them, but not forgetting the support ministries beyond themselves – World Hunger, missionaries around the world, two congregations next door to us and countless people helped through the food pantry and the preschool.

By faith, these members made personal sacrifices – personal and significant sacrifices – to establish this church on firm footing for the ages to come. And by faith, called pastors and interim pastors have come through our doors to lend their support in faith and hope – Pastor Rosebrock, Pastor Biemiller, Pastor Garrett, Pastor Walker, Pastor Schroeder, Pastor Orrell, Pastor Horn, Pastor Morey, and Pastor Cook.

By faith, we are as inspired by the knowledge of their sacrifice and hope as we are by the biblical giants listed in the Letter to the Hebrews.

That letter calls these saints of long and more recent past a “great cloud of witnesses.” Indeed they are. They witness to us that surprises like we have experienced this week, just like all the surprises and blessings of recent years, are just the beginning of the blessings that God has in store for us here at Holy Cross Lutheran Church.

Therefore, with this great cloud of witnesses to inspire us and such blessings as we are privileged to receive from the hand of God, let us do as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews bids us. “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” And expect, as he did – by faith – that God will lead and guide us all the way to his eternal promise and his eternal throne.