

Last weekend I preached on the first half of chapter eleven of the Epistle to the Hebrews, asking the question, “what is faith?” In the context of that sermon I shared some of my own personal journey, something I don’t do very often from the pulpit. In part this is because I sometimes assume that after all these years you all more or less know my story. But it is also partly because I don’t ever want my own story to overshadow the Biblical Story. That is always a danger, I think, that preachers need to watch out for—it is a temptation to make it about us rather than about God.

And yet the Word has become flesh and dwelt among us; which is to say that in Jesus we see our own stories in a new light. I think we come to see our journeys as sacred when we are able to see them in light of the Gospel, in the light of God’s Story. And not only the good parts of our stories either; the moral parts we bring to with us to church. But also the broken and even shameful aspects of our lives as well—the fights and wounds and fears and anger of our shadow sides. Like Jesus showing Thomas the wounds in his hands and his sides, so I think it is with us as well: often it is our wounds that best identify who we are.

Our stories intersect with God’s Story and in some real sense they are the same story, since God’s Story is an ongoing saga about forming a people after God’s own heart. And I think that is what the writer of Hebrews 11 means to convey. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, not only on All Saints’ Day, but every time we gather to Remember the Story and to Break the Bread.

I said last weekend that I don’t believe that faith is best understood as listing the seven doctrines you need to affirm to be counted as “in.” I tried to say that faith and belief are not the same things. This is not to suggest that beliefs don’t matter, but beliefs change over time. The Nicene Creed, for example, has a purpose and an historical context that every Christian ought to learn something about. And I love it that it begins with the word “we”—because even if on a given week I am not sure what *I* believe I can trust the larger community to hold that for me. Sometimes very sincere people tell me that they aren’t sure they are really Christians because they either don’t believe or maybe even understand what it means to say that the Son was “begotten, not made and of one Being with the Father.” But it is a serious misunderstanding of faith to think we have lost our faith when what we are in fact doing is questioning our beliefs. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.* Faith, in other words, is about trust.

There are a lot of names in today’s reading and behind the names are stories. But I want to focus on two of them: Moses and Rahab. Poor Moses actually got cut by the lectionary committee: we skipped thirteen verses since last week that are all about his life. But I assume that most of you here today are pretty familiar with him. By faith, Moses was hidden by his parents; by faith, Moses (when he was grown up) refused to be called son of Pharaoh’s daughter; by faith, he left Egypt unafraid of the king’s anger, by faith he kept the Passover, by faith the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea...

Whether we first heard the story from *The King James Bible* or *Good News for Modern Man* or from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, most of us know something about the Moses and the Exodus. It’s a story immortalized on film by Charlton Heston in *The Ten*

*Commandments* and more recently in *The Prince of Egypt*. A new Pharaoh arose in Egypt who didn't know Joseph, the dreamer, and that Pharaoh became nervous about an uprising. He did what dictators always do when they get scared; he flexed his muscles and started coming down on hard on the Israelites until finally he started ordering the deaths of male children. The people cried out to God and God heard and saw their misery. And then God called Moses. You remember at the burning bush, how Moses turned aside and encountered *I AM*, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God said, "I'm sending you to tell old Pharaoh to let my people go." And so the story goes...

We learn something about God in this story: God cares about the plight of human beings, especially when people are being oppressed. God cares about justice. God intervenes on behalf of those without access to political power. But God doesn't do these things by waving a wand. So we also learn something about ourselves, about what it means to be human—because God does these things by arousing the concern of people like Moses and Aaron and Miriam. They become instruments of God's peace. God *hears* and God *sees*, but then God *sends*. This pattern is important and the prayers we've been using this summer make this insight explicit: sometimes we need to pay attention because for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, we are very often the answer to someone else's prayer. We find our lives intersecting for a reason.

The story of the Exodus and the subsequent time in the Sinai is a long one; in fact it takes up four of the first five books of the Bible. All those plagues and Pharaoh's hard heart, a heart that would not be softened with reason. An escape filled with intrigue and followed by forty years in the wilderness. Faith isn't a short-term fix, the story seems to suggest, but a long-term commitment. It's a story passed on to children and grandchildren, a story relived by every generation. Faith like Moses and those Israelite refugees takes the long-view and requires patience and courage.

Perhaps not everyone here knows who Rahab the prostitute was. After forty years in the desert, after the death of Moses, his assistant, Joshua, becomes the new leader in the sixth book of the Bible, appropriately named the Book of Joshua. Joshua's ministry is very different from that of Moses. Moses led the people out of Egypt; Joshua will lead them into the Promised Land. Their gifts are different and their leadership styles are different because the work they are called to do is different. Joshua will fight the battle of Jericho because as it turns out, the Promised Land isn't an empty lot; there are people living there (the Canaanites) and it turns out they like living there. So the long battle begins, a theological and political conflict that has still not been resolved thousands of years later.

*Whose land is it?* The theological answer the Bible gives, of course, is that it is *God's* land and at best humans are called to be stewards of it. But nonetheless, the Bible believes that God has promised the Israelites to take care of it, not the Canaanites. And so they take to battle because when you want something that someone else has it doesn't usually work to tell them, "God said you should give it to us." Before Joshua 'fit the battle of Jericho, there is reconnaissance work to be done. Even if you believe God is "on your side" that doesn't mean you forsake good military practices. So Joshua sends some special ops guys into Jericho to see what they are looking for.

And they head to the home of Rahab, the prostitute. Now somebody sees them and calls the police, who promptly show up at Rahab's door. She's smart and she sees which way the wind is

blowing. So she lies to the police. She tells them that the men were in fact there, but they've left and if they head out really quickly they might be able to catch them. But in fact she has hidden the spies on her roof. (Now having spent some time in the Middle East this winter let me just add that middle eastern roofs are not sloped because they have no worries about snow; they are flat and often have little terraces where you can go and sit and drink and smoke.)

But the main point here is that if Rahab is caught, she is guilty of treason. She has hidden two enemy spies who are in her city doing reconnaissance work, spies who intend to destroy her city and conquer it. She tells them all she wants in return is for her life and the life of her family to be spared. She tells them the whole city is worried, but she heard about their God and about what he did to the Egyptians and she'd rather be for 'em than against them. *By faith, Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.*

With no disrespect intended to good old Moses, I worry a bit about hero worship that paralyzes ordinary people from being faithful in ordinary ways. When we turn people into superheroes we tend to worship them, rather than emulate them. I love St. Francis but he is the most revered and least emulated saint in the Church. Don't forget that before he started talking to birds he stood stark naked in the public square and gave away all of his money. In our own day, Martin Luther King gets a holiday, no doubt well deserved. But King was like Moses, and if that's the case then maybe Rosa Parks is a modern-day Rahab, an ordinary woman who just got tired of being told where she could sit. She wasn't a superhero; just someone who said, "enough is enough already."

Now I don't want to push the comparison too far. But I do want to push the notion that you can find saints anywhere you choose to look and if you are only looking for Moses and Martin you will miss the most amazing people who cross your path every day. You can meet them at work or at school or at tea or over coffee, and sometimes even at Church.

Faith compels us to better learn the story of God's people, not only Abraham and Sarah and Moses but Rahab and Gideon and Judith and Hannah and Samuel, a list much too long to tell on a summer weekend. We cultivate faith when we pay attention to the births and marriages and deaths that are part of our extended lives in community. When we pay attention to that first day of college, or the last. And better still, all the little moments in between. When we pay attention to changing a diaper or teaching that same child to hit a golfball, or to drive; when we unload the dishwasher or take a long walk along the beach or pick up our kids from summer camp and can see it in their eyes, they have been changed somehow.

We are part of a pilgrim people—a communion of saints, a great cloud of witnesses. And I think the journey itself is home, that is that it is along the way that we discover the God we seek. By faith we, too, do the best we can and by faith we sometimes do great things. But more often faith is about doing the small things, things that at the time it isn't even clear make a difference. By faith we do the work God gives us to do. By faith we press on, even when we feel tired or bored or fearful. Because people like Moses and Rahab and so many countless others were lights in their own generation, we pray that by faith we might allow God's light to shine through us in this time and in this place, so that the next chapter of the story—of God's Story—can continue to unfold.