

Running Our Race
Heb. 11:29-12:3
Nov. 6, 2022
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A few weeks ago, Amy and I were in Denver, and while there we went to the iconic Red Rocks Amphitheater, one of the most famous music venues in the world. It's known as an amazing place to see a concert, but did you know they open their season each year with an Easter Sunrise Service? I thought that was pretty cool. Underneath the amphitheater is a museum, and one of the exhibits includes a complete listing of every musician who's ever played on their stage, from its opening performance in 1941, which included the Denver Municipal Chorus singing "Home on the Range," to today. Reading through the list of the acts that have played there was staggering: the Beatles in 1964, the Who, the Rolling Stones, world-renowned organist Jane Johnson. Not yet? Well, it's their loss! Reading through the list of musicians was like walking through the history of popular music.

That's the same feeling I get when I read today's passage. Chapter 11 of Hebrews reads like a Faith Hall of Fame, as the author recounts notable examples from Israel's past of people who boldly lived out their faith, even in the face of difficult circumstances. It was a word of encouragement that the readers of Hebrews needed to hear. They were a group of newly converted Christians who were facing serious persecution and were considering returning to Judaism or just giving up the faith all together. They were struggling to understand if what they believed about Jesus was actually true and worth the sacrifice. Wouldn't it be easier just to give up? So, the author lines up this litany of people who persevered through incredibly challenging times and yet clung tenaciously to their faith in God. As former Jews, the audience would have been familiar with each name, and each story would have stirred an inspiring memory. The author is basically saying to the Hebrews, "If they could do it, you can do it."

It's an impressive list. Moses leading the people through the Red Sea. Gideon helping make the walls of Jericho fall. Rahab saving the life of Israelite spies. The author says, "I really don't have time to tell you anymore," then goes on to list Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. He reminds them of people who conquered kingdoms and administered justice, who routed foreign armies and escaped the mouths of lions, all God-inspired heroes with bronze plaques on the wall.

Then the author brings it down a notch, moving from the more famous examples to those whose fate was less desirable. Don't forget about those who were tortured, chained, and put in prison. They were stoned to death and impaled on poles and – my personal favorite – sawed in two. And yet, through all of this, they never lost their faith. This is quite an impressive Faith Hall of Fame.

Now, put yourselves in the shoes of the readers of Hebrews. They're complaining about a little persecution, they're balking at some harassment, they're thinking this faith experiment is over. And then you get this letter, an ancient version of John Belushi from "Animal House" screaming, "Over? It's not over until we say it's over! Was it over when the Thessalonians bombed Pearl Harbor?" The author says, "Did Abraham give in? Did Moses throw in the towel? They kept the faith, and so should you."

But hold on just a second. Are these people really heroes? If we look more closely at the plaques, we might be able to see the blemishes that tarnish each one. Heroes? Really? Abraham lied about being married to save his own skin – twice! Jacob swindled his brother and

deliberately deceived his father. The almighty Moses was a stutterer with low self-esteem – oh, and a murderer. Rahab was a prostitute. Gideon worshipped idols. Barak was blood-thirsty. Samson had a wild lifestyle and libido to match. David was an adulterer and murderer. Samuel was a complete failure as a father. The prophets? Don't even get me started on all their neuroses. All of a sudden our extraordinary people of faith are looking quite... ordinary.

Ordinary. I was thinking of that word as I read through the list of people we have lost in the past year, people like Billie Johnson and Joe Warren and David Clark and Bob Burns. Each name represents someone who was a part of our church family, who participated and contributed to the life of the church, who helped make Crestwood what it is today. But there are no World Series champions on that list. No Nobel Prize winners. No one who rescued a bunch of slaves from Egypt or got sawn in two for their faith. In many ways, these saints are...well...ordinary.

And yet, each time Carolyn Floyd served as an Elder or Bill Rea gave an offering or Georgia Meece participated in a Sunday School class, that was important, because the history of this church is made up of just those kinds of ordinary moments experienced by ordinary people. As we look back, we get a glimpse of the shoulders on which we are standing, the people who sacrificed and served so that this church could be here today, the people who made this place a community, inviting and blessing and sending out in Jesus' name.

I love what the Hebrews author says to encourage his readers to keep going: "Yet all of these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God has provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect." To truly capture the magnitude of what's being said here, let's read the translation of this verse in the Message. Think of this as applying to the people who helped make Crestwood what it is today: "Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours."

That feels like a lot of pressure, right? The legacy of faith left by Bob Noel and Harold Faulconer and Susan Neff is dependent upon us to carry it through. Can I be as faithful as the saints we named earlier? Hebrews says that as we combine our faith with the faith of those who have come before us, we are making history, we are writing the story of who Crestwood will be. That's an amazing responsibility with which God has entrusted us. Doesn't God know we're just ordinary people?

I don't know about you, but it's a bit daunting to me to think that the faith of Abraham and Moses and Joe Hall and LaVonne Caudill can only be made complete through us. What do we have to offer? Now, last time I checked, we haven't had any congregation members that parted a sea or slept with lions, and unless you've raised children, you haven't been subjected to any cruel torture. So, what can we ordinary people possibly do that will help bring these saints to their perfection?

I think it's pretty simple. We pick up the baton and we run our race. That's it. We run the race that's been set out for us. We lace 'em up, we take our place, and we put one foot in front of the other, no matter how shaky or unsure, trusting that God is making history with each step. I love the fact that chapter 12 of Hebrews starts with a most important word: "Therefore." That implies that all that has been said previously has a bearing on what comes next. We are the living "Therefore." Because of all of the ways God has been at work here at Crestwood, because of all the people who have made this congregation what it is, "Therefore." Therefore, what?

"Therefore, because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is

set before us.” Life can be tough, but we are not alone on this track. Hebrews reminds us there is a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on. It’s Moses and Abraham. It’s Sue Ann Cowgill and Tom Christerson. It’s our own family members who have gone before us. They are all there, encouraging us to make history by doing the ordinary things of faith, coming to worship and going to Sunday School and giving an offering and serving on a ministry team. When we do these ordinary things, God makes extraordinary things happen. So, we run our race.

That’s not easy. When I go for a run these days, I mentally prepare myself to strain, to sweat, to struggle. And that’s just bending over to put my shoes on. Sometimes my race feels more like a stumble than a swagger. Some days I feel like I’m stepping backwards in my faith, tripping over even the smallest hurdles. There are no shortcuts in this race. It’s not a 100-yard sprint. This race we’ve been called to run is life-long. We’re not called to be the fastest. We’re not called to beat someone else. We’re simply called to run, following the example of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who ran from Bethlehem to Nazareth to Galilee to Jerusalem, running to the cross, then to the grave, then OUT of the grave! Jesus fired the starting gun for us, those who’ve gone before set the example for us, so we run.

Where are we running? Well, that’s what we get to find out, isn’t it? The future is a bunch of blank pages, waiting for God and us to join together in writing the next chapter of Crestwood’s life, continuing the narrative that’s already been penned. I don’t know the specifics, but I trust that chapter will be filled with moments of transformation and transcendence, moments when Crestwood will change lives and embody God’s kingdom here on earth. We will be called to welcome and serve and teach and learn in new ways. We’ll do those things on behalf of those who have gone before us, those who are cheering us on, and we’ll do it to honor the One who gave us life and faith and calls us to live it, no matter how imperfectly.

You are here for a reason. Maybe you were born into Crestwood, maybe someone invited you, maybe you stumbled across this church on your journey of faith. However you got here, you are here, and we can make history together in how we love God and serve others. Next week, someone new is going to come here, looking for welcome and acceptance and even a glimpse of God’s love. And maybe, just maybe, that person will sit next to you. I pray that somewhere down the road, they say, “I’m here because someone took the time to make me feel like I belong.” We have work to do, Crestwood. We have another chapter to write. God has given us the strength we need. Jesus has marked the path. Our saints are cheering us on. Let’s give this faith thing all we’ve got. Are we ready to make history? On your mark...get set...