

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WEST TEXAS

❖ *Practicing Lent*

A Series of Weekly and Daily Reflections for Lent 2015

Fifth Sunday in Lent ❖ March 22, 2015

John G. Lewis

“Surrounded by so Great a Cloud of Witnesses”

Sylvia Maddox has prepared deeply insightful weekly reflections on the faithful lives of several 20th Century saints. They appear each Thursday in our Lenten study. Today, on this Fifth Sunday in Lent, we continue Sylvia's theme entitled “Cloud of Witnesses.” We reflect together on a portion of the New Testament canonical writing known as *Hebrews*. In chapter 11 of *Hebrews*, the author recounts the faith and faithfulness of many figures from throughout the history of Israel recorded in the Old Testament. The author then concludes his run through our ancestors in the faith by reminding us in 12:1 that “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”

For today's session, we will consider a few of the most important witnesses discussed in chapter 11 of *Hebrews* and the climactic conclusion to this parade of faithful stars in 11:39-12:2. Like the saints highlighted in Sylvia's weekly meditations, these ancestors in the faith form part of that “great cloud of witnesses” who point us toward different ways of living faith and faithfulness in our own generation.

From the scriptures, part one.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors became witnesses. By faith we understand that the worlds were created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. (Hebrews 11:1-3)

For Reflection.

Faith is a word of confidence. The more faith I have, the more confident I am about what I believe and trust. But as most of us know, it becomes harder to have trust and confidence in things we cannot see.

Here, in the opening verses of *Hebrews*, chapter 11, the author affirms that our ancestors in the faith did in fact trust in things they could not see. They have become witnesses, pointing us to different ways to trust God and to follow God's word. According to their witness, we do this by placing our lives in God's hands, even when our final destination is neither known nor in sight. Our ancestors in faith become examples for us, giving us confidence to follow similar paths, with the promise that, by doing so, we, too, will encounter the one true and living God.

Questions for Reflection

- Do you and/or your congregation have trouble trusting in things you cannot see? If so, give a concrete example, and explain why this is so troublesome.

- Who are some of your ancestors in the faith, those whose trust in God give you and/or your congregation the confidence to follow God faithfully in your own lives?
- What are some of the *characteristics* of your ancestors in the faith that you and/or your congregation want to follow by example?

From the scriptures, part two.

By faith Abel...By faith Enoch...By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household...By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going....By faith Abraham received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised....By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin....By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land...By faith the walls of Jericho fell...By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.... (Hebrews 11:4-31)

For Reflection.

Many of us occasionally wonder where the early Israelite and Jewish heroes stand in the eyes of God, who only *later* sent Jesus Christ into the world. In chapter 11 of *Hebrews*, the author provides us with a theologically-sophisticated answer and points us toward hope for our own future with God in Christ.

We hear of the faithful Abraham, comfortable and affluent in his own world. He nevertheless packs up his entire household and belongings to leave a good life in order to follow the direction of a God who only promises to show him *later* where he is bound. Can you imagine selling that kind of move to your family today? Yet, in some ways, we can hear a similar story in the life of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Responding to God's call, he, too, set out on a similar journey, without a known destination, as he led the movement that challenged the legacy of centuries-long racial discrimination in America.

We hear of the faithful Moses, once comfortable and powerful in the house of the Egyptian Pharaoh. He nevertheless leaves behind the good life to suffer in solidarity with his own people. The story of Moses as depicted here in *Hebrews* 11:23-28 reminds us in some ways of the life of the German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He left the safety and security of a job in America to return to his native Germany to join others in opposing the leadership and direction of the Nazi party under Adolph Hitler.

We hear the story of the Israelites, who braved crossing the waters of the Red Sea as they fled Pharaoh's pursuing army. Most of us who are older probably picture the theatrical portrayal of the high walls of water parting at the command of Moses, played by Charlton Heston in the classic 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments*. It may be more realistic, however, for us to imagine the fear of the Israelites who entered the water without any sense of how they would get through the water and

wondering whether they would drown in the process. They, too, remain a powerful example of a group of people who trusted God with their very lives and had the confidence to act without knowing the outcome.

Questions for Reflection

- Has there been a time in your life or in the life of your congregation when you gave up a great deal to follow God's call? What gave you or your congregation the confidence to take such action? What was the outcome?
- Has there been a time in your life or in the life of your congregation when you took an unpopular position to stand alongside a person or group of people who were persecuted and oppressed? What gave you the confidence to take such action? What was the outcome?
- Has there been a time in your life when you or your congregation put your physical or economic life at risk to follow God's call? What gave you the confidence to take such action? What was the outcome?

From the scriptures, part three.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had planned something better for us, so that, apart from us, they would not be perfected. 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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of the 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. (Hebrews 11:39-12:2)

For Reflection.

The author of *Hebrews* continues to interpret the faithful lives of our Israelite and Jewish ancestors. He answers some of our questions about their place within the wider community of God's people. Even though they were faithful in their own day, the author of *Hebrews* concludes that they did not fully receive what was promised them by God. *Hebrews* then boldly proclaims that we, the followers of Jesus, even now, have become part of the process of "perfecting" the faith and faithfulness of our ancestors! What an image! Through faith and faithfulness in our own day, God is knitting us into the larger tapestry that comprises all of God's faithful people and, simultaneously, perfecting the faith and faithfulness of those who came before us.

How can this be?

Hebrews depicts Jesus as the fulcrum of godly faith and faithfulness. He is the "pioneer and perfecter of the faith" (12:2). Jesus becomes the center of attention. As the one who suffered faithfully in obedience to God's will and was raised from the dead by God, Jesus became both the originator and perfecter of true faith and faithfulness to God (see also Hebrews 2:10). Through his faithful suffering and his resurrection from the dead, Jesus transfigured the earlier faith and faithfulness of his ancestors, while also charting the course for the faith and faithfulness of all of us who follow him.

That means our faith and faithfulness make a difference: not only to those who follow us, to whom we become examples, but also to our ancestors, who never knew

the faith and faithfulness of Jesus. God continues to weave the tapestry with the lives of those who live God's faith and faithfulness in their own day, a tapestry that will only finally be finished when God's kingdom comes to earth in its completeness, with all its radiant splendor and glory!

Practice.

Make a list of those who have influenced your faith and faithfulness or that of your congregation. Where possible, make a plan to thank them for their influence.

Now, make a list of those who are being influenced by the way you and your congregation live your lives of faith and faithfulness. Make a plan to ask them how you're doing.

Prayer.

Gracious God, who sent your son Jesus Christ into the world to show us perfect faith and faithfulness by willingly suffering in his obedience to you: grant us the wisdom to follow him faithfully in our own day; the courage to share in his sufferings as our obedience might require; the awareness of the influence of our actions on the faith and faithfulness of others; then knit us into the beautiful tapestry that is your faithful people throughout all the ages; and, finally, bring us to that place of completion in your kingdom where there is eternal life for all your faithful people. *Amen.*