

Heaven's Cheering Section

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Fort Hill Presbyterian

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Scriptures: Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." ⁶Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." ⁷But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD." ⁹Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Hebrews 11:1, 29-12:2

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

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.

¹Therefore, 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.

Proclamation of the Word

Maybe you have seen the movie *Dead Poets Society* which launched in 1989. The film is about a boys' prep school and a passionate English teacher, Mr. Keating, played by Robin Williams.

There is a compelling scene in the movie when Keating leads his English class out into the foyer of the building where old photographs of graduating classes from decades past cover the walls. He has a student read aloud, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, old time is a still a flying, and this same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying." As the boys study the portraits of the classes who had graduated generations before them, Keating remarks that the men in those pictures were just like them, full of hopes, hormones, and ambition. Then Keating asks his class, "Did they wait till it was too late to make of their lives an iota of what they were capable?"

Then he tells the class that if they lean in close they can hear a message from the men in these pictures who are now fertilizing daffodils. So they lean in and Keating whispers, "Carpe Diem. Carpe Diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

He is giving the boys more than an English lesson. He is teaching them a life lesson.

Today's Bible passage is like walking through a hall of portraits of those who have gone before us in faith to lead extraordinary lives.

Avery after the Ice cream social at the Downs, "Did you know Mr. Clayton has written a book?" I went on to tell about all the people in the room, the work that they have done, the contributions they have made to the church, and the ways they continue to make contributions to the community, the church, and the others.

Keating tells the boys, Make your lives extraordinary. And the writer of Hebrews adds a caveat, "By Faith." It is through faith and the work of God's spirit that we can lead extraordinary lives not for our own glory, but for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The reading from Hebrews today is about living by faith.

- It is a reminder of all who have gone before us who have triumphed and lost,
- who have executed justice and been victim of injustice,
- of those who have shut the mouths of lions and others tortured and stoned.

All had led extraordinary lives for the sake of their calling...to be faithful followers of God in Jesus Christ.

God gives the gift of faith to those whom God calls.

In our reading from Jeremiah, the prophet, we heard about his call to serve in faith. God says, "You whom I have formed in the womb, I consecrated before you were born." God has a purpose for Jeremiah. Jeremiah's reply to God's call is "I am only a boy." Wrong answer. God will not accept the excuses.

Excuses are easy: I am too young, too old, too afraid, too weary, unequipped, not knowledgeable enough, not good enough. Excuses become that which hinders us and keeps us from moving forward in faith.

If you and I are to lean extraordinary lives of faith as these, Verse 12:1

states, Lay aside weight and sin. Those excuses become our weight, something that holds us back and prevents our fully running by faith.

And that is sinful.

It is sinful to not believe that God can do what God seeks to accomplish through you and me.

It is sinful to turn away from God's call upon our lives ignoring the responsibilities that are ours.

And it is a sin of pride that deludes us into thinking that we have to do it by ourselves without the help of God or those God has placed among us to accomplish God's will.

Maybe you have things that are weighing you down.

Perhaps there is a deep seated anger with another or a situation and you need to forgive and experience forgiveness.

Maybe you carry the burden of a cumbersome life devoid of simple joy.

Maybe you have been too self-absorbed to notice those in God's world who are vulnerable, voiceless, living way too long with the effects of injustice.

All those things are possible when we place our trust in God and say,

"Lord, help me."

Wouldn't it be nice to be free of that extra baggage and weight? To hand over those things that burden us to God?

Many of us enjoy traveling. With recent airline regulations some of us have tried to figure out how to travel lightly with just one carry-on so we do not have to pay extra fees for luggage. I don't know about you, but when I have traveled lightly, I have found that I managed just fine. I did not need all the stuff I thought I would. I focused on the essentials, the necessities, finding that I could move with ease through lines and get where I was going more simply.

I know it is the same with some athletic endeavors. Serious Cyclists have bikes with hyperlite carbon frames which make all the difference in how they run the race.

Running the race of faith without the burdens and weight of sin is possible with God's help.

Hebrews, says, Run with Perseverance

Whether your race takes place in the classroom or the board room,
the football field or the mission field,
the breakfast table or the soup kitchen,
the unemployment line or the lunch line at school,
the health unit or the free medical clinic,
we are called by faith to push through when things are difficult,
to trust
that we will get a second wind, and
that we do not run alone, but are surrounded by heaven's cheering
section, a cloud of witnesses who have run this race, not exactly
the same way, but who are cheering for you and God's purposes in
this world to be accomplished through you
They are cheering because they started it.
They picked up the baton for a while and did their part,
and now it is your turn and it is my turn.

Eugene Peterson's translation of verse 40 in *The Message* offers one understanding: "**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 verse suggests that our faith is also not complete apart from theirs. It is a not a private race only by which we gain a prize.

It is a race that benefits and blesses all who are touched by God through our part in it.

Each one: young, old, man, woman had a small part to play in a much bigger drama. And today with the blessing of our backpacks, both real and figurative, we are reminded that we are all called to live out our ministry in our lifestyles, as family members, moms, dads, in our careers as students, administrators, healthcare workers, business people, community leaders, neighbors- Christians.

Look to Jesus

This book of Hebrews is written to the small Christian community, a band of disciples whose moderator or pastor wanted to encourage them as they pioneered a new faith in the messiah, Jesus. They had broken with their Jewish mothers and fathers, their tradition, but they needed to remember that they were standing in a long line of faith ancestors- ancestors who were human, fallible, sinful, imperfect, but through God's grace and strength took part in this great race towards the future which God has prepared.

This chapter in Hebrews opens with **“faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”**

We are people who value experience.

We like to touch, see, and hear in order to know something.

And this letter of encouragement, reminds us that what we can see and know most clearly is Jesus who for the sake of the Joy that was set before him, is the pioneer, the first in faith.

Jesus has run this race before, suffering the depth of human pain in his life and on the cross.

He reveals most clearly the God we know who said I will neither leave you nor forsake you.

He speaks to us saying, “I have set before you a challenge and I will lead you forth in faith. You can trust me. Be assured that there is a great cloud, a cheering section in heaven that are pulling for you and asking for you to do your part for God’s kingdom so that we all might know God’s perfect wholeness and peace.”

Imagine yourself doing your part, running your leg of this amazing race.

You are running, doing your best, enduring, persevering, living out your faith but now running out of steam.

Then you look up, see the crowd which includes those who have gone before like Moses, Daniel and those you know by heart, your grandfather, a mentor.

You see them cheering and you dig in, take another breath determined to keep going. Then you see Jesus.

You were so busy looking down at the pavement that you forgot about him.

And you remember why you are out here in the first place and who has called you before you were born.

He has heard all your excuses and knows your deepest sin, but still beckons you forward, so that you are free to run with wild abandon and press forward to the joy that awaits all of God’s children.

Then you catch up to Jesus, and he speaks close in your ear, while you try to catch your breath.

He says, “My child, I knew you could do it. Well done, good and faithful servant.”

So I ask you, Is there anything more extraordinary than that?

Concluding prayer/Acclamation

[20](#) Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, [21](#) to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. From the book of Ephesians