

Sermon for Pentecost 10-C August 17, 2025

Hebrews 11:29—12:2

Luke 12:49-56

By 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. By faith 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 in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of 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. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They 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— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

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 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.

There is nothing, no amount of hardship, suffering, disappointment, brokenness, loss of faith, that can separate you from Jesus' presence. Jesus' presence with you is based upon who he is and his claim upon you. Nothing - short of your mind believing that Jesus has abandoned you. In short, Jesus' presence with you is based upon him not you. And when you are feeling distant from him, just simply call out his name.

I would like us to reflect on a truth that challenges a belief of what it means to live a life of faith. For people in the church and for some who have left the church, they believe that faith in God is a shield against all hardship, a golden ticket to a problem-free existence. This popular understanding perpetuated by prosperity gospel preachers often say: if we just believe hard enough, pray fervently enough, put enough money in the offering plate, or live righteously enough, our lives will be miraculously smooth,

devoid of pain, struggle, or disappointment. The problem with this belief is that it is not biblical.

Nowhere in scripture are we promised a life free from problems and suffering simply because we have faith or belief in God. In fact, the biblical story shows the opposite. This is a crucial point that we must hold to if our faith is to be resilient in the face of life's inevitable storms. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, individuals who devoted their lives to God not only faced challenges and hardships inherent in human life but also encountered unique forms of suffering and adversity directly coming from their commitment to express and live out their faith.

Consider these heavy weights of the Jewish faith – Abraham and Sarah, were called to leave everything familiar behind; Moses, who faced the wrath of Pharaoh and the grumbling of his own people; Job, whose life was utterly stripped bare, yet who hung to God; the prophets, who were mocked and persecuted for speaking truth to power. Their stories are not tales of bliss but of profound struggle, intertwined with their very devotion to God.

The book of Hebrews, offers a stark account of this reality for the early followers of Jesus. It speaks of these followers whose lives were marked by their unwavering faith despite immense suffering. The text tells us: *Others were tortured... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword* – all because of their desire and need to live out their faith. These were not people who had failed in their faith; these were people whose faith was so real, so deeply rooted, that it empowered them to endure unimaginable pain rather than deny their God. Their suffering was not an indication of God's absence or displeasure, but a testament to their profound commitment.

In our gospel story we hear Jesus speaking about his followers, and the cost of discipleship for it caused divisions within their own families. We hear of *father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother* – all because of their desire and need to live out their faith. The radical nature of Jesus' teachings and the transformative power of the Gospel often created rifts where previously there had been harmony. This wasn't a failure of faith; it was the inevitable consequence of a faith that called for a complete reordering of priorities, a putting of God first, even before the closest of human bonds.

This recurring theme, woven throughout the biblical story, underscores a profound and liberating truth: *faith is not an exemption from life's difficulties but rather a foundation upon which to navigate them.*

This statement is not a softening of the Gospel; but a clarification. It sets us free from the crushing burden of believing that our suffering is a sign of spiritual failure. It liberates us from the false promise that if we just "have enough faith," we will never know illness, financial strain, relational brokenness, or grief. Life is inherently difficult. We are all subject to the consequences of our actions and the actions of others, and the unpredictable nature of human existence. Faith does not magically remove these realities. Instead, it provides us with something infinitely more valuable: the bedrock upon which we can stand when these realities crash in around us.

Think of faith as the sturdy keel of a ship. The keel is the backbone of the ship, it runs along the center of the hull from stem to stern. When the seas are calm, the keel is still there, providing stability, but its critical function is not immediately needed. But when the storm hits, when the waves are huge and the winds are howling, it is that deep, solid keel that prevents the ship from capsizing. Without it, the vessel would be tossed about aimlessly, utterly at the mercy of the weather. With it, even amidst the biggest storm, the ship can hold its course, make progress, and eventually find its way to calmer waters.

Our faith in Jesus is precisely this kind of foundation. It is the unwavering conviction that even when the ground beneath us seems to crumble, God is faithful. It is the deep-seated knowledge that we are loved, that our lives have purpose, and our lives belong to God. This foundation doesn't make the difficulties disappear, but it gives us the means to *navigate* them.

When we fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, we gain a transcendent perspective. We see our struggles not as the end of the story, but as chapters within a larger story of our life of faith. We understand that our lives are part of God's story, and that even in suffering, God can work for our good. This perspective doesn't eliminate the pain, but it reframes it - *I do not understand what is going on right now, but I know that I am not alone in it.*

The author of Hebrews exhorts us to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us." This race is not a sprint; it's a marathon, full of uphill climbs, unexpected obstacles, and moments when we feel we can't take another step. Faith allows us to draw upon an inner strength that is not our own, the strength of the Holy Spirit, enabling us to keep going even when our own resources are depleted. It's the conviction that God is with us, empowering us to face whatever comes our way.

Let us, therefore, lay aside every weight that causes us to look inward. Let us shed the false expectations and the burdens of unrealistic promises. And with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, knowing that we are never alone, surrounded by a great cloud of

witnesses, and built upon the unshakeable foundation of God's enduring love and grace for each of us.

Amen.