



First United Church of Oak Park

Saints: Heroes of the Faith

Hebrews 11 & 12, selected verses

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How fitting, fortuitous, Holy Spiritus, if you will, that this, All Saints Sunday, and its accompanying text from Hebrews, should be the punctuating Scripture and liturgical event to our sermon series on Heroes of the Faith. In a way, we have been in an All-Saints Season since the start of the program year, where we have remembered, acknowledged, and celebrated just some of our ancestral heroes.

Ironically, three years ago, in the midst of the pandemic, I preached the sermon for All Saints Sunday, in which I expressed a desire for more than one day to remember and honor our ancestral heroes of the faith, saying that it should be a season because it's important not to jump too quickly from death to life, from what has been lost, sacrificed, and suffered to the need to move forward and persevere. I still believe this to be true, in part.

I believe in the importance of acknowledging our grief and in honoring it by giving it the time and space to become a part of our story, but I have come to understand that although All Saints is certainly a day to remember and honor our beloved dead, it is more about remembering the lives of faith they lived and how they can be a source of strength and comfort for us in our own lives of faith, which can be a struggle.

Our text tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, conviction of things not seen. Another way of saying this is that our FAITH rests in the things we most hope for, leading to firm belief and action in the visible, tangible world, even though it is rooted in things that cannot be seen.

This season, in our sermon series on Heroes of the Faith we lifted up the lives and stories of Noah, Rahab, Esther, Puah, the Bleeding Woman, and the Good Samaritan, seeking to glean from their stories wisdom and inspiration for our own life of faith, which we did. Some of the characteristics of these heroes we lifted up are right here on this cape: heroes are courageous, willing to ask for help, they are compassionate, etc.

And each of them acted out of faith. Each made a decision, based on a hope that their faith rested on, and took action without knowing what the outcome would be. They built an ark, hid the spies, pleaded to the king, ignored Pharaoh's order, reached out for help, reached out to offer help...they did not know, there was no way to actually see a flood coming, that the wall of Jericho would fall, that the king would show mercy, that they would deliver the deliverer, that healing would come, or that kindness would be rewarded.

Their faithful actions, done in the name of justice, love, righteousness, compassion, are testaments to the God they believed in and who God is. And in so doing brought God's promised realm a little closer.

The actions and stories of all those who came before us, ancestral heroes of the faith, whether they are listed in the Bible or not, whether they died a thousand years ago, a hundred years ago, or a month ago, serve as witnesses to the God of love and life of love God calls us to as disciples.

They are examples to us, extensions of the example of the life of Christ, that we are called to act out of our faith that rests on our hopes, even in the face of opposition, maybe even especially in the face of opposition.

Because if we are honest with ourselves, those who faithfully respond to God's call, who speak truth, and seek to bring the kin-dom of God to fruition often lead to social, cultural, or religious estrangement.

This is why the author of Hebrews reminds us of the great cloud of witnesses that surround us, that we are a part of. To comfort us when we feel the weight and challenge of the opposition we face. To provide us with a source of strength to continue to act out of our faith and hope, when we can't see what the outcome will be. There is strength in numbers and because just like our ancestors, our faithful actions have the ability to prove the love of God to the world, and we do not undertake this calling alone.

So do not grow weary or lose heart. May the great cloud of witnesses be an endless source of empowering endurance in the proverbial race of life to respond to God's call on our lives with faith and hope, with conviction and compassion.

Amen.