

You're Surrounded!  
Sermon on Hebrews 11:29-12:2 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, August 19, 2007

In the police dramas, it always signals that the end is near for the criminals. After 45 minutes of examining evidence, pursuing leads, interviewing suspects, obtaining search warrants, and a few car chases, dog legs, dead ends, and wrongly accused suspects, a bunch of squad cars pull up to the abandoned building, sirens blaring and lights flashing, battalions of uniformed and plain clothes officers assume their positions with weapons drawn, and the haggard lieutenant gets on the loudspeaker and barks: "This is the police! You're surrounded! Come out with your hands up." The crooks never like being surrounded, but they seldom surrender, preferring to shoot their way out, only to wind up dead or in custody.

For the criminal element, being surrounded is never good news. For those of us who struggle with matters of life and faith, being surrounded is very good news indeed. The writer of Hebrews proclaims, "We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (12:1). And that cloud is a very great cloud indeed: It begins with Abel, who "by faith offered a more acceptable sacrifice" (11:4), and swirls round to include Enoch who "had pleased God" (11:5) and Noah who "by faith built an ark to save his household" (11:7). After him came Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, who considered God faithful to the promises he had made (11:11). The cloud grew to include Joseph, who prophesied the exodus from Egypt (11:22), and Moses, who "refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God" (11:24-25) before he led those people to freedom through the Red Sea "as if it were dry land" (11:29). And when the people of Israel came at last to the Promised Land, they marched around the walls of Jericho for seven days, and on the seventh day, "the walls came a tumblin' down." But one resident of Jericho, a prostitute named Rahab and her family, were

spared because she had given lodging and safe passage to two Israelites spies, for she believed in the God of Israel who had done marvelous things for his people (see Joshua 2:1-21, 6:22-25).

It is a great cloud of witnesses, and yet there is not enough time to tell all of their stories. The judges Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah were military leaders who won great victories against all odds. David was the king of Israel *par excellence*, who ruled with justice for all, enlarged the territory of Israel, and by his fidelity to God established a political dynasty. Samuel the prophet was a national leader who restored Israel's faith when God seemed to have abandoned them when the Ark of the Covenant was lost. Samson, David, and Daniel all "shut the mouths of lions." Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego "quenched the raging fire" of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace after they refused to bow down to this foreign king's statue. The prophets Elijah, Elisha, and Jeremiah all "escaped the edge of the sword" when pursued by angry monarchs. The judges of old, including women like Deborah and Judith, "became mighty in war, [and] put foreign armies to flight" (11:34). The widow at Zarephath in Sidon and the Shunammite woman both "received their dead [sons] by resurrection" (11:35a) by the faith and actions of Elijah and Elisha. The list of the heroes and heroines of the faith could go on and on.

The safe passage through the Red Sea, the destruction of Jericho's walls, the conquering of kingdoms, the administration of justice, the quenching of fire and escaping the sword, the routing of armies and receiving of the dead by resurrection—all of these things happened "through faith," the faith of individual men and women who entrusted themselves to the power and presence of God. These events signal what Fred Craddock calls "the triumphant, successful outcome of faith."<sup>1</sup> This is the faith that claims, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13, NIV). It is the faith that sings, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *The Letter to the Hebrews: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, New Interpreters Bible XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 144.

have already come; 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."<sup>2</sup> It is the faith that leads to victory in the face of overwhelming odds.

But there is another side to faith. Not all of God's faithful people live in the sunshine of prosperity, the breeze of freedom, the comfort of a secure environment. Some of God's faithful "were tortured," literally beaten like a drum, refusing to renounce their faith or to accept release if it meant compromising their beliefs. They accepted their torture "in order to obtain a better resurrection" (11:35b). Others, namely the prophets of Israel, "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment." Tradition tells us the prophet Jeremiah was "stoned to death" and the prophet Isaiah was "sawn in two" (11:37). Though earlier it was affirmed that some of the faithful "escaped the edge of the sword," others of the faithful "were killed by the sword." For Jeremiah and Isaiah, for the prophets as a whole, and for countless, nameless others, "faith brought them hardship and mistreatment, often of the most cruel kind imaginable."<sup>3</sup>

The miserable fate of these heroes and martyrs raises the age-old question, Why do good and faithful people suffer? Why is it that people who love, trust, and obey God often experience terrible and intense suffering? Why—if God is at work in the lives of all these people, if God is with them and acting on their behalf—did they have to suffer as they did? Of course, there is never a full or correct answer to the question of why. If we could explain why, things would not seem so bad. But part of the point is that things *were* bad, often very bad, for some of God's people. But here we come to the point: The fact that the faithful suffered in a world unworthy of them, "was a sign both that they believed that God was making a new world in which everything would be better, and that this belief was in fact true."<sup>4</sup> The faithful were out of step with the world, going against the grain, because "they were living by faith in God's future while society

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<sup>2</sup> Stanza three of "Amazing Grace," lyrics by John Newton, 1779, #378 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Craddock, 144.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 146.

all around them was living as though the present world was all there was or ever would be,”<sup>5</sup> and God gave them the power and the strength to live like that, thereby proving the truth of their claim. Faith is the power to live every day in the light of God’s promises as though what will be already is. Faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1).

Every week when we say, “I believe in the communion of saints,” we remind ourselves that we are surrounded by this cloud of witnesses, this host of people who lived and died in the faith, waiting, believing, trusting in God to fulfill his promise of a new and better world—a world of justice and peace, a world of truth and beauty, a world of righteousness and joy. The saints remind us that faith consists in triumph and tragedy, success and failure, life and death. Whether our lot is rejoicing or suffering, victory or defeat, that cloud of faithful witnesses surrounds us and bears testimony to God’s faithfulness. The saints tell us that God is preparing something better for those who trust in him. The saints encourage us to lean forward in hopeful expectation that the promises of God shall be fulfilled. They teach us to “look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” and see in him that joy came through faithful endurance, that glory was won by disregarding the shame of the cross, that victory was secured through obedient submission. If ours is to be victory, if ours is to be triumph, if ours is to be resurrection, then “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” (12:1). You are surrounded by saints. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.