

## **Now Faith**

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

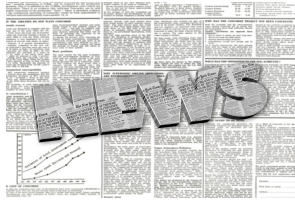
Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

9th Sunday after Pentecost - August 7, 2022

Texts: Hebrews 11:1-3, 6-16; Luke 12: 32-40

Hebrews 11.1-3, 6-16 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith. 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 he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them

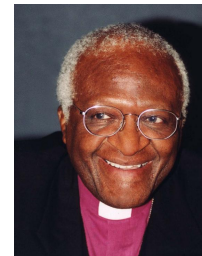
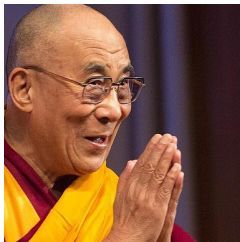
GOSPEL READING Luke 12. 32-40 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Your word, our light; your grace, our hope; your love, our life. TBTG.



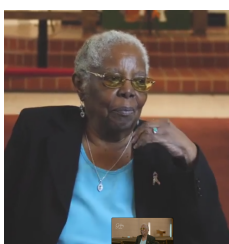
Funny things make me laugh sometimes. Not jokes; the other sort of funny. I was doing my online screening in preparation for my annual wellness exam. The last two screens were covered with questions about my mental health. In the last two weeks, have you felt...depressed, anxious, worried, angry, hopeless (just for a start): with a choice of responses: not at all, some days, many days, all the time. I laughed because, well, the news lately? If I say, “Not at all,” I’m lying, nuts, or not paying attention.

Then I thought of what Mike Resman told us last Sunday, about the “heart prayer” that takes over when we practice talking to God on a daily, consistent basis: when we abide (not hide) in God, we live from a deep space, a center. We’re still aware of the perturbations, disturbances, and general turbulence of the world, we are actively engaged with its troubles, but in constant touch with a deeper bedrock of trust. Dwelling in God, dwelling in faith.

I like to believe that’s what the writer of Hebrews was really talking about when he described the longing of the “heroes of faith” for “the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” The unseen-but-realer-than-real destination that is also here and now, not in some other, better otherworldly world. As this chapter famously begins, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” I take “now” in its literal sense: this present moment. What is your faith now? What is it built on? It helps to know people who have modeled it. Next week you’ll have a chance to share your heroes. Today I’ll give you my examples.



My first choices were obvious: heroes known to the world, like the Dalai Lama; the naturalist Jane Goodall, author of *The Book of Hope*; Marian Wright Edelman, founder of The Children’s Defense Fund; Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the spiritual force behind Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa. (Notice how happy they all look?) But I realized, I don’t really know them. And while they may inspire me, it’s from a distance. What I thought long and hard about, and invite you to think about this week, is close-up heroes, whose lives touch yours. The ones we *know* to be “depressed, anxious, worried, angry, or hopeless” some days, or maybe even many days.



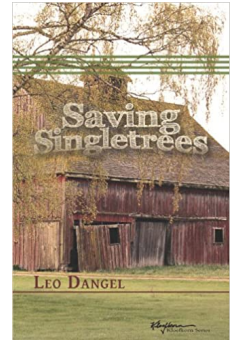
Like Deloris Wilson of Cabrini Green. By faith she stepped up at the funeral of her son, murdered by a rival gang, and over the casket that held his shattered body, said to his homeboys, already fingering their weapons and plotting

revenge: “The violence stops here. There will be no retaliation, no more shooting.” And the violence stopped. At least for that time



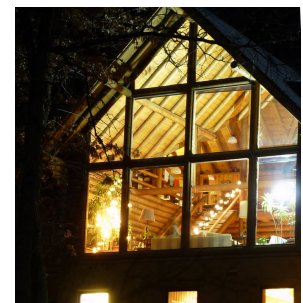
Like my friend Linda, a pastor whose hometown was the Swedish Lutheran backwater of Aitkin, Minnesota. By faith, she married a pastor from Liberia. By faith, they moved back to Africa to finish raising their children, to rebuild both church and society in the aftermath of a bloody civil war, for Bishop Jensen (in the purple shirt) to shepherd the country through more political upheaval, an ebola crisis and the current pandemic.

Or my friend Leo Dangel, only son of a big Catholic farming family, paralyzed from the neck down at age 20. By faith, he abandoned his plans for the priesthood, or to cultivate the ancestral land, and instead went on to attend college, then to teach college himself, and to write with brilliant insight and humor of his country roots. He was recognized as a significant poet by the likes of Garrison Keillor and US poet laureate Stanley Kunitz.



Or Mel Duncan, founder of the Nonviolent Peaceforce, who built an international cadre of peacekeepers who by faith enter the most explosive and violent places on earth, from North Minneapolis to South Sudan and train the local populations in unarmed civilian protection. Yes, by faith, they march in to show by example that war doesn't solve the problems that caused the war; but neutrality, humility, respect, and dialogue may.

Or Ruth Halvorson, visionary founder of the ARC Retreat Community. By faith she and her husband Loren signed a contract for cedar logs from British Columbia to begin building. The night before delivery, they learned they needed \$20,000 by the next day to pay for the logs. As Loren told it, “We were on the phone all night,” And Ruth would counter: “We were on our knees all night.” They raised the money. By faith. And friends. And prayer. ARC remains a haven of peace for people of every faith.



I call these, and so many others, my personal heroes, not just for the ways they stepped out in faith but, because I know them, I am also familiar with their days - sometimes many days! - of depression, worry, anxiety, anger, and feelings of hopelessness. I know how they sometimes stressed over mistakes they might have made - and mistakes they did actually make. They are my heroes because I know how they struggled, but even in the midst of struggle, they looked to the city whose foundations were laid in their very souls, whose builder and maker is God.

One more hero needs to be mentioned. Not because I knew him in the flesh, though I would say we speak to each other often. (And not because I call him “my personal savior,” either. I honor your belief, if you do; but I can’t bring myself to use such individualistic language about one whose love object is the whole world.) But because, before he was identified as the Christ and cornerstone of creation, Jesus knew himself as a human among humans. He was quite possibly depressed, often frustrated, angry at least once, and wept bloody tears as he begged to be spared



the wrath aroused by his teaching about divine love for faltering, faithful women and men, and flawed, unlikely saints. Touching the core of his own humanity, he could assure his frightened followers, “Don’t be afraid, little flock, for it is God’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

What is the kingdom? Not financial security; Jesus warns them to jettison their possessions immediately. Not leisure; he urges them to be at work, alert, ready day and night to do whatever’s needed. In other words, not the things our own society worries and frets over most days, and gets depressed and anxious and even angry about some days. Store your treasure in heaven, he says. And for Jesus - a Jew by birth, belief, and training - heaven is not a life-after-death made up of endless carefree afternoons at the lake or the golf course with similarly deceased but miraculously revived friends and family. (This is not to deny your trust, and mine, that your departed loved ones are alive in God today.) Heaven is simply the presence of God, before and after. Always. Heaven is where God is, and if God is within you, you have a foundation and a home. Now faith is...now. Unseen but unshakeable. God’s gift to you.

Breath prayer: Things/unseen

Credit for final picture: Verboeckhoven, Eugène-Joseph, 1798-1881. Shepherdess with Her Flock, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.  
<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=55543> [retrieved August 6, 2022]

God, our home: you are the ground where we’re rooted, the air we breathe; your Spirit calls to our imaginations and lifts our courage. Grant us the faith we need to face the times of our lives; And let us rise to meet the challenges not with fists raised and angry words but with compassion for each living soul, for our injured earth; help us understand deeply the core of things.

Let us follow the examples of your flawed faithful, our heroes in faith, and especially the perfect lover and savior of the world, Jesus, who prayed through doubts and fears, who ignored scorn and threats and suffered injury and death to persevere in seeking your realm for all. Surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, let us declare with them: the violence stops here. The hatred ends here. The cycle of abuse is broken here and now. In Jesus’ name, Amen