

“This Far by Faith”
Text: Hebrews 11:29-12:2
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*By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land...
Hebrews 11:29a*

Numbers are on my mind this morning. The number seven, for example. That is the number of speed bumps installed on North Morningside Drive while I was on vacation last week. I know some of you are thrilled.

Three is another number I am thinking about today. That is the average number of children who came to Sunday School and church just four years ago on Sunday mornings at Morningside. How many left this morning for Extended Session?

Membership four years ago hovered somewhere around 100. Today, our membership is over 300, with 45 new friends becoming a part of our faith community just since the beginning of the year.

The number 87 is an important number to think about. That was the average church attendance four years ago. Our average church attendance now is 187.

Eighty-two is the number of years this congregation has been in business. We were founded in 1925.

This week, I talked on the phone with a visitor who was here last Sunday. I had called her when I saw her name on one of the friendship pad sheets. She said, “Joanna, I came to celebrate my 88th birthday. I came to hear you preach. I sat down, and I said to my daughter, ‘Look. Joanna is not preaching today.’”

Then she said to me, “Joanna, I heard one of the most wonderful sermons I have ever heard.” Chris Henry, we are not even going to talk about how old you are!

For 82 years, Morningside Presbyterian Church has been in business, and what is our business? It is witnessing to the lordship of Jesus Christ and to his living presence in the world today and in our lives today. Our business is to give voice to the hope that is in us and buried somewhere in every human heart, the hope that we will come to the day when we will be able to connect with other people in ways that are neither greedy nor aggressive. We hope for a future that is different

from the present, a future in which peace on earth and good will among mortals is not a dream but an awesome, everyday reality.

I know I sound as if I have stopped counting and gone to preaching, and I have... I want to call your attention to the magnificent scripture that I just read from the Letter to the Hebrews. Its author was not interested in specific numbers when he wrote those most eloquent words: *Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and run with perseverance the race that is set before us.* The sentence actually goes on and on; it might be the longest sentence in the Bible, but its grand subject demands all that language can offer. The race that is described is a grand race that demands everything of those who participate. The most wonderful thing about the race is that Jesus has already laid out the course.(1) The most wonderful thing is that he ran the race ahead of us and showed us what perseverance looked like. The most wonderful thing is that whenever we run ourselves, whenever we take up the baton and do what is required of us, we do not do it alone, or even with the energy that exists only among ourselves. We are surrounded, the stadium is filled with so great a cloud of witnesses you can't even quantify how many there are. They are not only great in number, they are great in faith and gathered from every time and space into this one great body.

The rousing writer of Hebrews describes great adventures and perils: the passing through the Red Sea by the Hebrew people, with the armies of Egypt breathing down their necks; the kings and the prophets and a whole host of others, men who opened the mouths of lions and quenched fires, women whose apparent defeats were victories for God and for God's new order of reality. So great a cloud of witnesses, you cannot even measure them.

I love the openness of this image of the cloud. I like to imagine that the cloud, described so beautifully and metaphorically 2000 years ago, has kept on expanding across the centuries up to and including this very moment. Seats in the stadium are still being filled by your cheerleaders and by mine, by people who have pulled for us and are still pulling for us, telling us, "Go ahead, step up, lean forward, get going, don't stop until you become the person God created you to be. Don't stop until have accomplished what God put you on earth to accomplish." I am convinced that any of us can do just about anything if we have at least one someone in a seat in that stadium, someone, past or present, at least one someone who has been for us all the way.

Carlyle Marney, the great preacher and pastor to preachers, loved to use the metaphor of a house to describe a person. He said we have a living room in which we connect with others; we have a bedroom in which we rest; we have a dining room in which we get our nourishment; a basement in which we store our trash – yes, we need a basement, don't we? But we also have a balcony, where all the people who have encouraged us and influenced us to do our best, all of them are gathered. (2) You can see them in your imagination. For many of us,

most of our balcony people live only in memory now, but we know they are there. Among my balcony people are the aunt who taught me to love the church, the English teacher who taught me to love words other people wrote, my parents who were so indescribably proud of how I turned out. All I can think is that it must have been touch and go for awhile, because they were inordinately proud. There are others in my balcony, famous people who've changed the tide of history, who have renewed the church, who have stood for justice, who have inspired me to be brave. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I love Joan of Arc and John Calvin and John Wesley. Aren't you surrounded, don't you feel it sometime when you are discouraged, that there is somebody behind you saying, "I know you can do it. I can see you better than you can see yourself. I am with you all the way"?

The people to whom the letter to the Hebrews was addressed were a people who had forgotten there were any balcony people. They themselves were so tired and worn out they would not have been able to serve as encouragers to anyone else themselves. They were tired of walking the walk and couldn't even think about running the race. We don't know why. We don't know to whom the letter was written or even the occasion that evoked its writing. We do know it was written the first century after the birth of Christ. We know that it's really more an extended sermon than a letter, and we know that its recipients were having a major league sinking spell. We also know that the writer, or the preacher, wanted desperately for them to remember that what might seem impossible becomes possible when one keeps one's eye on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. He wanted them to know that they had gone too far to turn back.

I think of my friend Joan Brown Campbell, who for a number of years was President of the National Council of Churches. She's a great person and a grandmother. Joan says that when she was in labor about to deliver her first child, her grandmother said to her, "Well my dear, you are in to it now, so you'd better get on with it!" That summarizes the letter to the Hebrews. "Faith is required if your hopes are to be realized."

In order to encourage his hearers, the writer goes through a whole historical review, describing what ancestors in the faith had had to endure and how close they had come in many cases to reaching their destination, but how whatever they did was in some way incomplete until Jesus came and made everything complete and perfect. It's not the finishing of the race that is as important. Leave that in God's hands. What matters is that you take the baton and get out there and start running and don't stop.

The story is told by James Mitchener of how pilgrims in medieval times would travel from France to the cathedral of St. James in Spain. As they neared the end of that demanding journey, they would train their eyes toward the horizon hoping to see the tower of the long-sought cathedral in the distance. The first one to see it would shout, "My joy!" But they perished before they completed the pilgrimage.

(3) In the Biblical story, we have a God who wants to make sure the pilgrimage is completed, the journey is fulfilled, the race is won. He sends Jesus, who is the pilgrim for us all, who endures the journey, who passes through the valley of all human frustration and suffering, and at the end, takes his seat at the right hand of God.

Biblical scholar Tom Long asks us to envision a long cord of faithfulness that begins back with Abraham and Sarah and extends up to and includes this very day. This cord, Jesus has already taken to the high heavenly places. As it says in Hebrews: *We have a hope, a sure and steadfast anchor, a hope that enters the inner shrine of heaven behind the curtain where Jesus, forerunner on our behalf, has entered and has become a high priest forever.* (Hebrews 6:19-20) Thus, those who came before him and those who have come after him know that our running, our efforts, are not in vain.

In our day there are no fires to be quenched or lions' mouths to be shut, but there are risks in stepping out and doing what God calls us to do. Not long ago an Elder at Morningside gave me a copy of a letter written to the planning committee of Morningside Church in August of 1944. It was written by Arthur Vann Gibson, the distinguished pastor of this congregation. He wrote, "I believe the time has come for some formal statement from your pastor concerning the over all program of expansion in our church, in order that his mind may be clearer. . ." He called attention to the fact that the church should be "a house for the public worship of God." The church should build a sanctuary, and "the first requirement for a proper Sanctuary is that it should make every worshipper say within himself, 'Surely, God is in this place' . . . The inside of the building should be the expression of simplicity itself. The church is not a hall of fame, it is the house of God. . . The building . . .should be expressive of its one purpose- the worship of God. . . Try to combine the heritage of the past with the destiny of the future. Thus we may build to the glory of God. . ."

Do you think there were any risks involved in 1944? With World War II, do you think there were resources hanging from every tree? At the time, everyone was sacrificing. It was an age of sacrifice. This little congregation pressed on in faith, trusting that if a plan was of God, God would see it through. From a distance, they saw and greeted the promise with joy. They looked forward to a future whose architect and builder was God.

In just a few moments, we are going to hear about the completion of many of our *Time of Promise* endeavors at Morningside. Already, we have repaired more than 30 leaks in the roof. We are almost there with the organ! We have come this far by faith. We have laughed together about the "holy family" on the sanctuary ceiling in the form of a water stain. We have remembered that worship is at the heart of the enterprise called the Christian church. At the heart of this second and last phase is something that is equally essential to the Christian witness, and that is the issue of accessibility and hospitality. It's one thing to say that hospitality

and inclusion are what we are about. But just to say it has no meaning, if we do not make it actually so. At weddings, at funerals, on Sundays, everybody ought to be able to get around. I remember when a friend confined to a wheel chair had to be carried downstairs by four men in order to have a glass of punch with everyone else when he visited here. I guarantee you that when we have the Carol Sing this Christmas, there will be those who will not come because they cannot negotiate the stairs to get there. You and I can guarantee that Christmas of 2008 will be different. We have come this far by faith, and there is no reason not to finish the race that is set before us. We ought to do it. We have to do it. I hope we will do it for the joy of doing it. As George Bernard Shaw put it, "This is the true joy of life, being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. . . I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do what I can. . . Life is no brief candle for me. It is a splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as I can before handing it on to future generations."

Every once in a while, you sense the power and the light of a particular moment, a flash of connective energy that makes you shiver with excitement over what is yet to come. Sisters and Brothers in Christ, we have the promises of God as the ground beneath us. We have a great cloud of witnesses all around us. Let us lace up our shoes and finish the rest of our lap, confident that God will give us the strength to do what needs to be done. To our coach, to our role model, to our inspiration, to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, now and forever. Amen.

(1) Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, John Knox Press, 1997, p. 125-132.

(2) As told by John M. Buchanan, *Christian Century*, 11/15/03.

(3) Long.