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Heroes and Models Hebrews 11:1-16; 12:1-2

The author of the book of Hebrews gives us perhaps the best known definition of faith in all scripture – “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” – but that author was also aware that no definition could explain faith. Faith is defined by those who live it. We read Hebrews 11:1-16 and 12:1-2:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By 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.

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. ⁵By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and ‘he was not found, because God had taken him.’ For it was attested before he was taken away that ‘he had pleased God.’ ⁶And 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. ⁷By 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.

⁸ 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. ⁹By 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. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By 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. ¹²Therefore 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.’

¹³ 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, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But 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. . .

***12** 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, ²looking 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.*

A strange thing about the Bible. It doesn't have any heroes in it. Not like we usually think of when we say heroes. There are great women and men in the Bible, but they are always shown with all their flaws. Sometimes – for instance, King David – the flaws are a whole lot more evident than the greatness. But that's the way the Bible is about people. Pretty realistic.

By the way, that makes the Bible incredibly different from anything that had ever been written before. Everything else at the time the Bible was written had to do with larger than life characters from the past. The Iliad, the Odyssey, the epic of Gilgamesh. But the Bible's great men and women were people like Abraham, with his penchant for wheedling God to do things his way, or Rachel, with her tendency to manipulate the people she loved, or Moses, with his anger management issues, or David, with his itty bitty problem of adultery and murder. The Bible has no illusions about humanity. Even the greatest among us come with deep flaws.

We don't always like that. We want our heroes to be fresh off the shelf, in unopened packages, untouched by human hands – or even by humanity. We should know better. How often do we describe our voting experience as “Hold your nose and check the box”? We *always* choose flawed people to lead us – not because we have bad taste, but because those are the only sorts of people currently in stock. The best we can do is choose which flaws we are more comfortable with in our leaders. Then pray for them. And when the ones we happen to feel were more flawed win the elections anyway, we pray harder.

Ah, but give us twenty years, and some of us will have those leaders whipped into shape. We're good at whitewashing our great men and women as soon as they're no longer around to be inconveniently human. FDR, JFK, Reagan – they just don't make men like that anymore. In fact, they never did. Martin Luther, John Wesley, Susanna Wesley, Mother Theresa – such paragons of virtue, in our imaginations. But no. Flawed, all of them. Deeply. All of them have much they can teach us, but none of them are heroes. Not in the sense we usually mean.

We need to remember this as we read Hebrews, chapter 11, the great Faith chapter, which celebrates faith by holding up a catalogue of Old Testament characters as examples. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah. The chapter will go to include Isaac, Moses' parents, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. These may all be models of faith – though I have doubts about Samson – but none of them are heroes. One more time: the Bible doesn't do heroes.

We need to remember this as we consider All Saints' Day, the high holy day that transpired this week. When we hear the word “Saint” we tend to think of a paragon of virtue, and – guess what? – we don't have any of those. The Bible doesn't do heroes, and neither does the church. We do models.

And we need to remember this on this memorial Sunday, as we think about those who have gone before us this year. These are people who, living, were a part of our lives and who remain so now that they are gone. As we remember them, we remember what they taught us that has made us who we are, but we also remember that, like the great people of the Bible, they did all their good in spite of their flaws. We remember them as they were, not as heroes.

But perhaps as models. Models of this virtue or that. Models of this skill, this attitude, or this quality. We value them not because they are perfect but because through them, we can, with discernment become better versions of ourselves.