

“Faith on fire”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Hebrews 11:29-12:2*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

We know that this passage in Hebrews is supposed to be inspiring, with heroes of faith marching into life and battle. However, a part of us—just a small part—when hearing this passage, with its lions and sawing people in two, can’t help but think: “No thank you. I’m OK. I’m OK without your poverty, persecution, and torment. That’s *not* what I’ve been missing in my life.” It’s like walking into that old, old Catholic or Eastern Orthodox church and seeing bounteous rays of light stream through the colorful stained glass window of a saint happily holding his head in his arms, because he was beheaded for his faith. It’s supposed to be a moving image. And in at least one sense, it is. It moves you right out of that church: no thank you, I like my head just where it is. Personally, I prefer our God of rainbows and streams—aren’t they pretty in our stained glass window?—over the God of headless martyrs.

At the same time, a part of us longs for that kind of faith. Some philosophers say that the crisis of post-modernity is that we have no center. We pass from one fleeting thing to the next. Life feels empty, directionless, without a center to hold it all together, to give it meaning and purpose. In many ways we’re all looking for that center. We long for the faith that braves the teeth of lions and the edge of swords, because it knows who it is and whose it is. We long to be devoted to something so entirely, to give our lives in purpose and passion, to find the faith that is capable of staring down the wrongs of the world and creating something better, something worthy of God. A faith on fire for Christ, a faith that quenches thirst in the desert and offers peace in the storm. For though our lives may be very different from those of the persecuted Jewish Christians to whom Hebrews is addressed, we know storms and deserts and wars of our own. And it would be good to face such travails with armor.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said in a speech in Detroit, “There are some things so dear, some things so precious, some things so eternally true, that they are worth dying for. And I submit to you that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”

I think that’s why we all at some point wandered into a church—because we wanted to be fit to live.

In Hermann Hesse’s novel *Steppenwolf*, Hermine says to Harry, “You have a picture of life within you, a faith, a challenge, and you were ready for deeds and sufferings and sacrifices, and then you became aware by degrees that the world asked no deeds and no sacrifices of you whatever, and that life is no poem of heroism with heroic parts to play and so on, but a comfortable room where people are quite content with eating and drinking, coffee and knitting, cards and wireless.”

How many times have we wandered into a church, ready for deeds and faith, only to find a comfortable room where people sip coffee?

We should ask more of ourselves and others, not less.

Faith isn't just about believing that God's out there. Faith is about living as if God is right here. The author of Hebrews says that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). But don't be fooled by the translation. In the Greek, that word *assurance* isn't about thinking or believing a certain way; it's about *being* a certain way. It's the same word used in Hebrews to describe God's very being. It's more like "faith is the *reality* of things hoped for" (Harold Attridge, cf. Beverly Gaventa).

Faith is holding to the center, to the truth of reality, even when we cannot see it, or feel it.

Faith was Jesus living the reality of forgiveness in a world of hate. Faith was Jesus living compassion in a world of injustice, living worship in a world of egoism, living resurrection in a world of death. Faith wasn't an idea that he taught, or a feeling that just came to him; faith was a *choice* to live as if the world as presented to him, in its greed and smallness, its alienation and superficiality, was false. Faith was the choice to live as if that were the illusion, and God the reality.

Faith is far more practical than we give it credit. We think such devoted faith is beyond us because we don't feel it, or God seems absent, or we have doubts. We think faith is being swept off our feet—when in reality, faith is putting our feet to the ground and stepping forward. It is committing our life to a path.

Faith, the author of Hebrews tells us, is like a running a race. Now anyone who's run a race knows that sometimes it's exhilarating and sometimes it's just sweat and aching exhaustion. The person who finishes the race isn't the one who felt good all the time or never doubted. The person who finishes the race is the one who just kept putting one foot in front of the other.

A few years back, the world was shocked when Mother Teresa's letters were published, revealing beneath this exemplar of faith a universe of doubt and pain. Apparently, Mother Teresa, for almost 50 years of her life, keenly and painfully felt God's absence. Writing to a minister and friend, she said, "Jesus has a special love for you. [But] as for me—the silence and the emptiness is so great—that I look and do not see—listen and do not hear."

She wrote those words just three months before receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

Some insist that this revelation of Mother Teresa's inner conflict makes her a fraud. But I disagree. I think the fact that she struggled so much but persisted in the race to help others, to worship God, to witness to divine love, to regard the poor and the hurting as Jesus himself, I think that makes her truly the exemplar of faith. She dared to live a reality that she herself sometimes could not see or feel. She lived love when there seemed to be none. She lived God's presence when there seemed to be only absence. She gave her life, totally, to that race, that reality, that center.

In the end, her writings reveal that she came to realize that Christ had walked this path already, had run the race ahead of her, had shouted from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” She found that she was precisely the most with him when she felt the most alone, for her God was a suffering God.

Indeed, the author of Hebrews says that we run this race because Christ has already run it. There is nowhere we are called to go that Christ hasn’t already been. He runs ahead of us, and is there to meet us, in the places where we are exhausted or doubtful or suffering. This race is lined with a great crowd of witnesses, people who have run this race already and encourage us on—people who also were scared and angry and doubtful, but who kept on.

In the end, the faith that saves you, that grounds you at the center of all purpose and meaning, the faith on fire that you’ve been seeking for so long, isn’t miles away, some impossible ideal; it’s just one step—one act of living as if God were right here, love and justice, joy and truth—and then another, and another, one committed step at a time. Lions and dark of night, beware. **Amen.**