

SERMON CCI Hebrews 11: 23-29

Today is our 4th exploration of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. We've looked at Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Enoch, and Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. And we've learned that faith is more than believing about God; faith is acting upon our absolute trust in God. Faith allows us to see the invisible God at work in our lives, something that's impossible without faith. Last week we also learned that God uses moments of testing to strengthen our faith, and to clarify where our allegiances truly lie. We also saw that following God by faith has its moments of mystery. In today's stories of Moses, we discover that in the big and small choices of life, we are called to choose by faith.

Last Sunday we left Abraham and Isaac on Mount Horeb after God provided the ram for the sacrifice. In today's stories, Abraham had died and his descendants have emigrated to Egypt during a very severe famine. They found the food and water they needed, but unfortunately, while they were there, Pharaoh had taken them as his slaves. He forced them to build his extravagant buildings and pyramids that tourists still travel to see and experience. (vase) Egypt was one of the wealthiest nations in the world, yet Abraham's descendants lived as slaves.

Yet even under those circumstances, God had blessed them with many children, and over time, the number of Hebrew people grew until Pharaoh worried they had enough to revolt. So Pharaoh passed a decree that all baby boys born to Hebrew families were to be killed by the midwives as they were born; but girls could live. This would keep the Hebrews from growing into a mighty army against him. But the two Hebrew midwives quietly refused to obey the decree. So it was that Moses was born.

Immediately, Moses' parents had a choice to make. What would they do with their illegal baby boy? If they let Moses live, they could be killed themselves if the wrong person heard Moses' infant cries and reported them. But by faith, they chose not to be afraid of Pharaoh's decree and hid their son. After all, he was such a fine baby boy. Now all parents believe their children are extra-ordinary when they're born. They're perfect, so sweet. And then those dreaded teen years come, and if we allow them to survive being teenagers, we often believe they're extra-ordinary again. But by faith, Moses' parents saw more; they saw God's hand at work with a purpose for Moses and their people. And they chose to identify with God's people more than their personal safety.

By the second story of Moses, he lived in Pharaoh's palace rather than as a slave with his family and people. How did that happen? Continuing the last story,

Moses' parents hid him for 3 months in a little basket floating on the Nile River all day. They set his sister, Miriam, to watch over him and bring him to their mother whenever he cried. But one day, Pharaoh's daughter was bathing at the river's edge and discovered the basket, and decided to take Moses in as her own son. But she couldn't breast feed so guess who Miriam offered to be the perfect woman to be his nanny until he was old enough to wean? Moses' own mother! So Moses was raised in Pharaoh's household, but from the beginning, he also had his own courageous mother caring for him and teaching him the stories of his God so that by faith, he could stand with his people.

And we see his parents' faith in Moses. As an adult, Moses had to choose whose people he would identify with- Pharaoh's people or God's people. A life of wealth, fame, and prestige with Pharaoh or a life of slavery with the Hebrews. He could have risen in power in Egypt, and had land and as many wives and servants as he wanted. But *by faith*, he chose to be identified with his own people, even to be mistreated, in spite of what it would cost him. Exodus 2 tells us that:

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. ¹² Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.¹

Here was powerful Moses, dressed in his elegant clothing, watching his fellows Jews working as slaves. What was he thinking as he watched? Had his parents taught him as he grew up that God would use him to rescue his people? Then he saw an Egyptian guard beat one of his fellow Jews. And Moses has a choice to make. What should he do? Stand by and do nothing? After all, beating a slave wasn't illegal; it was normal. After looking around to see if anyone was watching, he killed and buried the guard. The guard may have had power over the slaves, but he had met his match in Moses, and lost. Since no one but the rescued slave saw it, he assumed he was safe. And surely the slave would be so grateful for having his life back, he would spread the good news among the other slaves and they would all honor Moses. After all, look at what he had done for them. He had already begun to rescue them. Right?

The next day he was watching again, and he saw two of the Jewish slaves begin to fight **each other**, and filled with yesterday's confidence, he walked up to stop the man he believed was being a bully. But instead of bowing in honor, the man asked, "*Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you going to kill me like*

¹ Exodus 2: 11-12

you killed the Egyptian?" Uh oh. It's choice time again. Standing with his people could now cost him everything, and Moses ran away in fear. It was quite the comedown. It was only after he had spent the next 40 years as a lowly shepherd, that he was ready to lead **his people** out of Egypt, not as a fighter with faith in his own power, but as a shepherd with faith in God's power.

Moses could have had an easier life if he had stayed in Pharaoh's household. He could have had a life with advantages most people never enjoyed. But he chose to identify with God's people even though it would cause him to suffer in the process. The writer of Hebrews called Moses' suffering "the reproach of Christ," he connected Moses' suffering to the suffering that Christians would experience as they stood together, willing to be known as God's people in spite of what it cost them. And he encouraged them to look beyond what they risked losing to see their eternal reward ahead. As the old hymn says, "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. Life's trials will seem so small when we see him." Living by faith through trials prepared Moses to lead God's people.

And lead them he did. *By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible.* The first time Moses left Egypt, his eyes were on himself and he left in fear for his life. The second time he left Egypt, his eyes were on the invisible God and his power. In that power he was ready to demand that Pharaoh, "Let my people go." This time his courage was driven by faith. This time faith gave him the courage to stand up not just against a bully, but against Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh met his match. But, it wasn't Moses. It was God himself.

Hebrews tells us *by faith, Moses kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood. So that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.* When Pharaoh refused to let God's people go, Moses' final task was to prepare his people for God to act in a powerful way. God's death angel was about to pass over the land. Every household was to kill a lamb and paint some of the lamb's blood onto the doorposts and lintels of their homes. They were to pack up their belongings, and eat the roasted lamb for dinner, dressed to travel at any moment. When the death angel passed over, he would protect every household where the lamb's blood was found. In the homes without the blood, every firstborn of that household would die. It could be the father, the mother or the oldest child, or even all three. Even the animals were at risk. It was a devastating night for every family who did not apply the blood of the lamb.

It was a messy thing Moses told the people to do: paint the blood of an innocent lamb to their doorposts. But, by faith, they were called to trade the lamb's blood for their own. The time of rescue had finally come.

When Pharaoh realized his own firstborn son had died in the night, he sent the Hebrews out of Egypt. They were saved by the blood. Jews celebrate this story of Passover every year near Easter. And here in this story, we Christians hear the foundation of our belief that Jesus is the Lamb of God, hope for sinners slain.

But the story's not over: *By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians tried to do so they were drowned.* Moses' faith had now become the people's faith as they followed Moses to cross the Red Sea on their way to the Promised Land. Even though Pharaoh sent his army to recapture them, God was still in control, and his soldiers drowned as the people of God crossed over on dry land. By faith in the God the armies could not see, they walked on to safety.

It's an exciting, dramatic story. And the writer of Hebrews wants us to understand that none of it would have happened without faith. Only by faith in the invisible God who keeps his promises were Moses and the Hebrew people given the courage to face their enemies and be brought out of slavery. Real faith and courage go together. It's a message the early Christians needed to hear as they faced daily ridicule and humiliation, and even death for their faith in Christ. As they watched their fellow Christians be killed by lions and the sword, their property confiscated, and others thrown in jail, the temptation to hide their faith in Christ to protect themselves and their families was huge. To deny their faith and even turn in other Christians in order to save their own skin. Over and over they faced the choice of whether to stand together and live by faith, or fear. The book of Hebrews encouraged them to "Keep your eyes on the invisible God like God's people always have done." "Live by faith, not by fear." "To not be ashamed to stand with God's people. The reward awaits those who stand firm."

It's a message we Christians need today because we too face choices about living by faith. I've never had to face death because of my faith in Christ, but I've faced choices about whether I will stand with God's people. On my way home from Camp Burton late Friday afternoon a week ago, I stopped for groceries, and when I got back to my car, I noticed that an avocado was sitting beside my purse in the child's seat area of my cart. That meant I never paid for it. It was choice time for me. Do I go back in and pay for it? But I was tired from the conference, the

lines were so long, and I had frozen food in my bags. So I chose to pay for it the next time I shopped and went on home.

A couple days later I was back at Safeway and I asked the checker to charge me for the large avocado that I didn't pay for last time and I told her what happened. She looked at me oddly for a moment and then said, "Thank you for being honest." It was clear this didn't happen very often, most people just accepted the free food. Then came the bigger choice. I had the opportunity to give God the credit for my being honest. That it wasn't just my virtue, it was because I was one of God's people. After all, God provides my every need, so why would I cheat? But I didn't say a word. Looking back, I realize I didn't want to sound like one of "those people," you know, those overly religious types. I chose to be seen as a good person rather than as one of God's people. It was such a small thing, it certainly was not dangerous. But I hid my faith. I almost want to walk out with another avocado, so I can speak by faith this time.

We all have big and small opportunities to identify with God's people. My avocado choice was a small opportunity. We stand together when we pray for one another, even those we disagree with, do we make time to stand with each other in prayer? When we visit our lonely shut-ins to strengthen their faith, when we give God the credit for blessings even though others may make fun of us, when we vote by faith, when we join in the ministries of this church, when we protest the wrong treatment of others even when it's unpopular, when we refuse to listen to gossip against one of God's people, when we support missionaries in other places, when we serve the poor together. The list is endless. Sometimes we'll be disliked or suffer like Moses and God's people have experienced all through the ages, but Hebrews reminds us that God's reward for us someday will more than compensate for any suffering we may endure. God's message to us in every choice is, "By faith, trust me, so speak up, live by faith, not fear. By faith, stand with my people. I won't fail you, and there's a rich reward waiting."

WELCOMING DOROTHY HAY INTO MEMBERSHIP

Today we welcome Dorothy Hay who has chosen to be identified with this congregation of God's people.

Dorothy, do you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord? I do.

Dorothy, do you believe in your heart God raised him from the dead? I do.

Then Paul says you are saved, and are our sister in Christ.

Dorothy, have you been baptized by immersion on profession of your faith in Christ? I have.

Our relationship together in this congregation is based on promises or covenants, about how we will treat one another, similar to wedding vows at a wedding.

Minister: Do you covenant to continue to grow as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, to love, support and pray for this congregation, and to use your gifts to build this body and serve in the world?

New Member: *With God's strength, I will.*

Minister: Congregation, do you covenant to also continue to grow as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, to love, support and pray for Twila and one another, and to use your gifts to build this body and serve in the world?

Congregation: *With God's strength, we will.*

Dorothy Hay, on behalf of this congregation, I give you the right hand of fellowship and welcome you as a full member of this church.

As we prepare our hearts for the Lord's Table, let's stand and sing There is a Redeemer.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

Another way we stand with God's people is at this Table of grace for all who believe in Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God. When Jesus first shared this table with his disciples, it was at a Passover meal as they ate roasted lamb, they remembered it was because of the blood of a lamb, their people gained freedom from Egypt. Jesus took some of the Passover bread after supper that night and said, "Take, eat, this is my body broken for you." Broken like the bodies of the lambs that first Passover, Jesus' body, broken for us.

As God's beloved people, let us eat together.

And after supper he took the last of the four cups of Passover wine and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Blood is precious stuff, it carries nutrients, hormones, and oxygen, but it's also messy. We don't like to look at blood, blood makes some people faint. Donating blood can be life-giving for people who can't produce enough themselves. But in this age of Hepatitis B, HIV, and other deadly diseases, blood can also be dangerous. At this table we remember that as the Lamb of God, Jesus' blood brings new life for all who believe and we give "thanks."

As God's precious people, let us drink together.