

SERMON FOR AUGUST 18, 2013

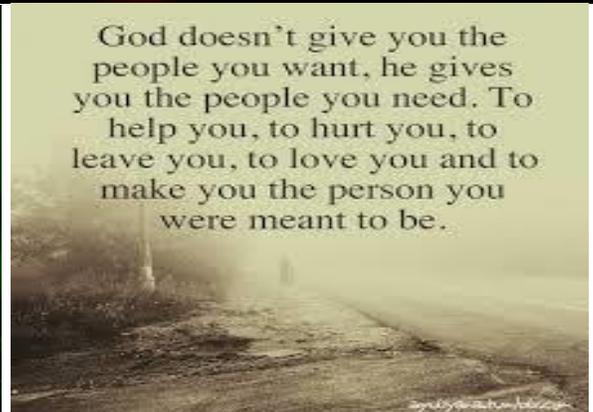
The First Chinese Church of Christ in Hawai'i (UCC)

7:45 & 10:30 Worship Services

Scripture: **Hebrews 11:29-12:2**

Message: **"Yes, Bad Things Happened for Years!
Yet GOD is With Us—Always!"**

Kekapa P.K. Lee



Gathering in the Word

This morning we are continuing the **testimonies of folks** in Hebrews 11 and 12! Last week we took a look at **Abraham and Sarah**. We talked story and some of you shared examples of faith here among our women and men of our Church! People liked to hear those stories!

We are continuing our understanding of **FAITH!**

Hearing the Word

Scripture Reading – Hebrews 11:29-12:2 (VOICE Bible)

²⁹ **By faith** the people crossed through the Red Sea as if they were walking on dry land, although the pursuing Egyptian *soldiers* were drowned when they tried to follow. ³⁰ **By faith** the walls of Jericho toppled after the people had circled them for seven days. ³¹ **By faith** the **prostitute Rahab** welcomed the *Hebrew spies into her home* so that she did not perish with the unbelievers. ³² I could speak more *of faith*; I could talk until time itself ran out. If I continued, I could speak *of the examples* of **Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, of David and Samuel and all the prophets.** ³³ **I could give accounts** of people alive with faith who conquered kingdoms, brought justice, obtained promises, and closed the mouths of hungry lions. ³⁴ **I could tell you how people of faith** doused raging fires, escaped the edge of the sword, made the weak strong, and—stoking great valor among the champions of God—sent opposing armies into panicked flight. ³⁵ **I could speak of faith** bringing women their loved ones back from death and how the faithful accepted torture instead of earthly deliverance because they believed they would obtain a better *life in the* resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mockery and whippings; they were placed in chains and in prisons. ³⁷ The faithful were stoned, sawn in two, killed by the

sword, clothed only in sheepskins and goatskins; they were penniless, afflicted, and tormented.³⁸ The world was not worthy of these saints. They wandered across deserts, crossed mountains, and lived in the caves, cracks, and crevasses of the earth.

Stories of faith and faithfulness are central to the First Testament. The writer of Hebrews recalls some of the most memorable examples of how people of faith lived their lives. **But what is faith? Faith is more than belief; it is trust, assurance, and firm conviction.** Ironically most of those who lived by faith never fully realized the promises God had made. **Like us they journeyed as strangers and exiles, longing for another country. We should remember their patient faith when we face prolonged hardships and allow the trials we face to strengthen our faith rather than destroy it. If we are comfortable here and don't face suffering for our faith, perhaps we aren't fully living by faith and looking forward to a future hope.**

³⁹ These, though commended by God for their great faith, did not receive what was promised. ⁴⁰ That promise has awaited us, who receive the better thing that God has provided *in these last days*, so that with us, our forebears might finally see the promise completed.

12 ¹**So since we stand surrounded by *all those who have gone before*, an enormous cloud of witnesses, let us drop every extra weight, every sin that clings to us *and slackens our pace*, and let us run with endurance the long race set before us. We may feel alone, but we aren't. We are surrounded by an army of witnesses. They have run the race of faith and finished well. It is now our turn.** ² **Now stay focused on Jesus, who designed and perfected our faith. He endured the cross**

and ignored the shame of that death because He focused on the joy that was set before Him; and now He is seated beside God on the throne, a place of honor.

The author of this Letter of Hebrews understands that:

- ✓ "Now Faith is the assurance of things *hoped* for, the conviction of things *not seen*."
- ✓ Faith is holding on to something that has only been promised, but not yet fulfilled!
- ✓ Faith is trusting that something will happen, even though it hasn't yet!

Faith, understood this way, takes equal measure of imagination and courage—imagination to envision the promise and the courage to act as if it will be kept even as we wait for it!

The persons cited about their faith:

- ✓ **Sarah** was lifted up and as an example last week since it was in her old age that she gave birth to Isaac!
- ✓ Today we have **Rahab** "the prostitute" (v. 31) who **by faith** welcomed the *Hebrew spies into her home* so that she did not perish with the unbelievers. This reception and welcome of holy spies and strangers by a *Canaanite* prostitute a jarring example of Hebrews' understanding of faith—that among other things—leads to the practice of radical hospitality (commended in 13:1).
- ✓ In verse 32—we have an eclectic and assorted list of the heroes of faith which includes some from among the **Judges of Israel: Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, Samuel**; one who was commissioned by a Judge—**Barak, David**, as well as the prophets.

- ✓ Verse 33 begins a run of heroic activities that are not attached to names:
 - Who shut the mouths of lions? Was it **Daniel**? Or **Sampson**? Or **David**?

Then comes this remarkable claim: that for all of these folks' greatness—these saints (mentioned in Heb 11) did **not** receive what was promised.

Then comes the *race text of 12:1*:

12 ¹**So since we stand surrounded by *all those who have gone before*, an enormous cloud of witnesses, let us drop every extra weight, every sin that clings to us *and slackens our pace*, and let us run with endurance the long race set before us. We may feel alone, but we aren't. We are surrounded by an army of witnesses. They have run the race of faith and finished well. It is now our turn. ² Now stay focused on Jesus, who designed and perfected our faith. He endured the cross and ignored the shame *of that death* because He focused on the joy that was set before Him; and now He is seated beside God on the throne, *a place of honor.***

- ✓ Only Jesus has **run** this course to its end—though—but doing so—Jesus has made it possible for others to follow—even for all of us gathered here in worship at TFCCCH!
- ✓ The shame of the cross is bested and outdone by the power of Jesus' resurrection!
- ✓ At the end of the **race**—our life—Jesus is seated beside GOD on the throne—a place of honor!

It is into this “invisible” presence (11:2) we lean forward in faith as we run the course now set by Christ before us. When the last of the runners make it across the finish line—Hebrews suggests—

- ✓ The stands of the stadium will be empty.
- ✓ The city of the Living GOD, made of “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” will form around the enthroned Christ and “innumerable angels in festal gathering (12:2).
- ✓ Sin, suffering, death will be no more!

Doing the Word

So what is the Word of God for us?

1.ONE: The Christian life is a struggle, a battle, a long distance race that causes us significant agony. The one thing it takes to finish the race—is perseverance born of faith!

- ✓ Persistence
- ✓ Determination
- ✓ Grit
- ✓ Stubbornness
- ✓ Diligence
- ✓ Resolve
- ✓ Drive
- ✓ Purpose
- ✓ Tenacity
- ✓ Dedication
- ✓ Obstinacy
- ✓ Devotion
- ✓ tirelessness

2.TWO: In all of this—you are not and never alone!

- ✓ You a part of a Family and church family!

- ✓ The church is a support group for one another and we need to be better to do that!
- ✓ The Bible reminds us again and again!
- ✓ By the way—Christians are not perfect people; God welcomes all kinds of people—especially sinners! Let's be GOD-like in welcoming people!
- ✓ Let us be a community who encourage one another! Let's learn how to be an encouraging and caring community too all!
- ✓ Let us be a community of people who encourage and pray for sin around us—rather than judge!
- ✓ Let us all at TFCCCH be a courageous (brave, daring, bold, gutsy, spirited audacious, dauntless, fearless, intrepid) people!

3.THREE: Let us keep our eyes on Jesus!

This familiar hymn-chorus by Helen H. Lemmel:

**Turn *your* eyes upon Jesus,
 Look full in His wonderful face,
 And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
 In the light of His glory and grace.**

Sent in the Word

Faithfulness requires and compels us to keep our senses open as we look for GOD's presence moving in our stories and experiences around us and in the world. We want to be aware of what's happening around us and others. GOD's vision is both local and global and personal and communal (shared with others). So STAY AWAKE! Strain your eyes toward GOD's messages hidden within the unfolding history and people around us, in our neighborhoods, and in our Church!

And so—**FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS!** Verse 40—GOD had planned something better for us so that only **together** with us would they we'd be made perfect!

We received the promised Christ in the person of Jesus of Nazareth!

So sisters and brothers—when it seems that you won't get what has been promised and you feel yourself slipping and sliding away from faith—FIX YOUR EYES ON JESUS! That's what the saints of old did. Even though they never got to see Jesus—they were saved by their faith!

You will too!