

The Great Hall of Faith

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 August 2019.

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56.

I've gotten hooked on yet another British drama series – *Poldark*. It is set in England just after the American Revolution. The hero, Ross Poldark, fought for the British. He returned home a little jaded to find his father dead and his estate in ruins. Ross set about to rebuild the estate, reopen the copper mines, and promote freedom and equality for all his neighbors, even though that sometimes put him at odds with other landed gentry.

I liked the series so much I started reading the books. There are twelve of them. I'm on number four at the moment. And as you'd expect the books tell much more of the inner life of the characters than the show can manage.

One interesting detail in the books is the impression people have when entering the great hall of another family home. Ross's cousins live at a much grander estate. The great hall and staircase there are covered with portraits of all the Poldark ancestors. Nearly every time someone enters that hall, the writer notes how aware they are of these faces from the past surrounding them on every side.

The writer of Hebrews was trying to convey a similar sense of history and gratitude and admiration. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . .* The verses we read go all the way back to the Exodus. But the writer actually went back farther. Chapter 11 began with Cain and Abel, the children of Adam and Eve. So all of humanity are in this hallway of ancestors. Enoch and Noah were mentioned. Several verses were devoted to Abraham and Moses. But then the writer moved away from the big names to ordinary folks, people like you and me, even people who were not Jewish and not respectable. Rahab was a Caananite prostitute. Samson was very strong but not at all reliable. Jephthah made a foolish vow and sacrificed his daughter. David was a hero but by no means guiltless.

What these people had was faith. Earlier, Hebrews had declared that *faith was the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. Faith is about trusting in God and moving forward on the basis of that trust, in spite of the challenges of the present. The ancestors, named and unnamed, were fueled by faith. Sometimes they triumphed. They shut the mouths of lions and put foreign armies to flight. And sometimes they were stoned to death and sawn in two.

So standing there in that great hallway of the ancestors, hosts of faithful people over the centuries, the writer felt a weight of joy and responsibility. These people were faithful in good times and bad. They hoped for what they could not see. But we can't rest on their efforts alone. We have to continue their work. It is as if the writer is saying, "This is our time. They are counting on us." *God has provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.*

Perfect means something different in the Bible than it means for us. We hear perfect and think 100% flawless, no mistakes, but that's not what the word meant in Greek. Clearly, our ancestors were flawed. We live with the consequences of their errors, and we may not be able to fix them, so they will not be made perfect in that way. Instead, the Greek word for perfect in the New Testament means complete and whole and fulfilled. Their work is not complete unless we continue it and keep striving in our day. They are counting on us.

But lest we think we have to bear all of this weight and responsibility on our own, the writer says no. Look around the Great Hall. *We are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses*. They are more than pictures on a

wall. Their faith and hope and energy live in us. And the most inspiring of all is Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. By claiming the same faith that empowered them, we can endure.

We don't know who wrote Hebrews. We're pretty sure it was not Paul, but we don't know much beyond that. We often call it a letter, but it sounds more like a sermon than a letter. We don't know where it was written. We don't know when. Some think it was before the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and some think after. We don't really know what was going on at the time.

But it seems that some of the people who received this word were becoming discouraged. It seems that some who first heard this sermon were on the edge of giving up. The writer begged them, "*Do not neglect the assembling of yourselves together, as some have done.*" It seems they thought things should be easier. Now, why they thought it would be easy, who knows? They must have forgotten that Jesus promised division, not unity, as we also read today. The ways of God are at odds with the ways of this world. God's people have always lived in the tension of what God knows is possible for us and what actually happens. They seem to have been struggling under that tension.

And so in that sense it could have been written at any time, even today. The way to get through discouraging, frightening, confusing times is by faith. For this writer, faith is more of a verb than a noun. Faith is not about what we believe. It is about what we endure. Faith is the thing that made all these people in the past get up every day and try to do right, even when it was hard. Faith made them work with God for a better world, even when they were destitute, persecuted, and tormented, even when they wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. The writer encouraged people in his own time to live with faith.

I saw an example of faith this week. A small group from St. Thomas visited Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin on Thursday. We try to visit on the third Thursday of every month. Stewart was built as a medium security prison, so it is more restrictive than immigration law requires. The folks housed there are not dangerous. But still, visits are by phone through a window, not face to face. Every time I go and talk with someone over those phones, I'm overwhelmed by his faith.

The man I visited this week came to the country legally when he was a teenager. His mother is a US citizen. Everyone else in his family lives in the country where he was born. His mom is getting older, and he wants to stay here to take care of his mom. So he keeps fighting his case, hoping he will be allowed to stay. He's a devout Christian. He talked about the person who led him to Christ. He asked if we could pray together.

He's been at Stewart for over a year. He said he watches the news a lot and struggles with what he sees. He is grieving the shootings in El Paso and Dayton and the families who have been separated in Mississippi, just like I am. I asked him how he keeps going. He said he studies the scriptures and prays and hopes. He said he knows he's made a lot of mistakes in his life, but he has become a better person. If it's possible for him, he said, it is possible for the world.

This man believes in God and Jesus. But he believes in ways that help him keep going. That's the kind of faith Hebrews has in mind.

And one way to tap into that kind of faith is by remembering, by standing in the Great Hall and remembering the people who came before. Remember Julian of Norwich, a woman who lived in the Middle Ages and wrote about the depths of the love of God when the Church was preaching judgment. Remember Constance and her companions who died caring for the sick during a yellow fever epidemic in Memphis. Remember Anna Alexander, a saint from Georgia who built schools and a church for African Americans after the Civil War.

Remember the faithful who started this congregation, not knowing what it would become. Remember the people who taught you the scriptures and the prayers. Remember heroes who resisted injustice and oppression and taught us how to love. Remember the coach or teacher or neighbor or Sunday School teacher or boss who believed in you when you did not believe in yourself and encouraged you to pay it forward.

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.

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Grace Burton-Edwards
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Columbus, GA 31906
StThomasColumbus.org