

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Pedro Suárez

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org



The Sermon Text — Hebrews 11:20-12:2

By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, ‘bowing in worship over the top of his staff.’ By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king’s anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

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, looking 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.

SERMON - Being Cheered On

Grace and peace are yours from God, our Father, and from His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

When I was 7 years old, I told my Mom when I got home from school one day that I had registered for a swimming competition. Mom was concerned and asked me, “But ...do you know how to swim?” Come on, how hard could it be? I had played in the water at the beach many times with my sister, I have seen people swim in competitions on TV and, it really didn’t seem that hard. So, I said, “Oh, yes.” Well, the day arrived and my parents, AND my sister, who will never let me forget this experience, were there along with parents and siblings. “On your marks, get set, go.” I jumped into the pool moving my arms and legs as hard and fast as I could, but I did not go forward, instead I was going down! I quickly found out a use for those ropes other than dividing lanes in the water. Then, besides hearing my sister laugh as hard as she could, I heard people cheering me on, so I pulled myself with that rope all the way to the end. Needless to say, it was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life, and according to some psychologists, I probably should not be here in front of you preaching. Go figure!

In our reading of Hebrews today, we are told that we are being cheered on in our living race by a cloud of witnesses. People who have given an example of what it means to live by faith in God. Phrase after phrase, the writer helps the reader, and particularly those in his time who were familiarized with the Scriptures, to remember. Phrases like, “conquered kingdoms” is the same one that the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus used to refer to King David. “Administered justice” is another description of David quoted in 2nd Samuel, and “Shut the mouth of lions” reminds us of Daniel. An interesting phrase is “they won strength out of weakness.” This could be making reference to several incidents. However, because of the era, the writer very well could be referring to a bloody story written in one of the Apocryphal books, the book of Judith.

There was a time when Israel was threatened by King Nebuchadnezzar, conducted by his commander, Holofernes. The Jewish town of Bethulia had decided to surrender in five days, having come to the end of their resources of food and water. There was a rich and beautiful widow in that town named Judith, who had lived mourning in solitude the death of her husband. She dressed in her best attires and managed to get out of town. She went straight to the Assyrian camp. She was able to get into the presence of Holofernes himself, and persuaded him that she believed that

the defeat of her people was the direct result of their sins and offered to show him a secret way into the interior of Jerusalem. She then gained his trust, and while he was asleep after being drunk, she killed him with his own dagger, cut his head off and brought it to his people. The traitors were silenced and what was supposed to be a defeat turned out to be a great victory. The weakness of a woman had become so strong that she saved her people. The author of Hebrews wants to inspire a sense of courage and responsibility as he brings these stories from the past.

We are reminded again today, that God's powerful hand has not weakened and his power can be shown in our lives at any time. We are also reminded today that we are in a race, therefore there is a goal. We are not just tourists exploring around and coming back to our hotel, or the same place of departure. Every day we should ask ourselves, "Did I make any progress?" In our Christian living, we are inspired by so many people who keep giving us examples of faith. People just like us, with weaknesses that God has turned around.

Having so many witnesses gives us a lot to choose from. They give us inspiration, just like when a musician looks and listens very carefully to an admired master performer, trying to find techniques and different ways to play a certain piece. Then she may apply it to another piece, or play around with it to come up with something new perhaps. If we don't know those who came before us, and if we don't know what they did, it is harder for us to run our race. Sometimes our pride gets in the way. Just like 7 year old Pedro that thought that only by looking at one point in the life of someone that had practiced and learned how to swim, that made it look so easy, that he could also do it. What I was trying to do is taking a shortcut to swimming without the actual practice and learning process.

The encouragement of the writer of Hebrews is that we just do it, race. We also have a means. It is persistence. The word in Greek for persistence is Hypomone which really means an active patience. As I was studying this on my deck at home, I looked down and I saw this little ant carrying the dead body of an ant at least six times its size. It made a long journey through many obstacles. It came to the step and continued with the big body hanging, it was amazing. When it came to the hose, it began to climb up it, again with the big dead body hanging. Right in the middle, something disconnected her from the big ant. I couldn't see what it was at first, and it seemed like it was there floating. The little ant walked back and forth trying to find a way to recover her "*food for the rest of her year.*" Then I saw that it had been trapped in a spider web and the skilled spider was able to bring that big body into the middle through the sticky web. I couldn't help but think how that little ant felt losing her precious cargo, and there was nothing she could do about it. So, she did the only thing she could, without thinking anymore, she went back the same way she came, her long journey to wherever she found that big ant body, with hopes she might find another one, or something similar. That is persistence, an active patience. I felt like I was cheering for that ant and she had no clue of my existence, perhaps being

so used to ignore big creatures, I don't know. I stopped to think that many times God is there, watching, letting us run our race, and we ignore Him.

Many times in life, circumstances or other people take away our precious cargo. Today we are reminded again, that we must continue the race "looking 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." He is our goal, and who is with us day by day, together with many others who are cheering us on, and waiting for us at the end. Amen. © 2010