

SERMON
HEBREWS 11:29 - 12:2
“FACES OF DISCIPLESHIP: THE WITNESSES”

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH – WINSTON-SALEM, NC

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Sermon Title: “Faces of Discipleship: The Witnesses”
Sermon Reference: Hebrews 11:29-12:2

— My story, Our story, God’s story —

This morning I challenge you to think to yourself “what is my story? What is our story? What is God’s story?”

My story is part of our story, and our story is part of God’s story. Stories connect us, remind us who we are, where we come from, what we’ve learned, what’s important to those we love, inspire us, reach the deepest parts of our souls, and encourages us to keep living, dreaming, and doing. Some stories make us cry, while other stories make us smile, and better yet, some stories make us laugh until our belly hurts. Our whole life is a story in the making, shaped and formed by other people’s stories.

For example, a couple who had been married for years were in their kitchen preparing dinner. One spouse was sitting at the kitchen table reading catching up on social media while the other spouse was preparing a ham for dinner. The wife sitting at the table watched as her husband cut off about one inch from either end of the ham. She asked why he cut the end off, proclaiming “that’s a waste of good ham!” He said “well, that’s the way my mom prepared the ham and it’s always tasted really good!” The wife asked “but why did your mom cut the ends off?” The husband just shrugged his shoulders and said he didn’t know.

Later, the husband called his mom to find out why she cut the ends of the ham off. His mom said “well, son, because that was the way my mom prepared ham.” The husband’s grandmother had passed away several years earlier, but his Grandfather was still living. So he called his Grandfather and asked “Grandpa, why did Grandma cut the ends off of the ham?” He was silent as he thought for a moment. Then the grandfather replied, “so the ham could fit in the baking pan!”

Over the past several weeks, Pastor Emily’s sermon series has been about the faces of discipleship. We have journeyed together through different characters in the bible, we have listened carefully as many of you in this room shared your story of faith, and this morning we focus on Hebrews. The book of Hebrews is actually a letter, though we aren’t quite sure who wrote this letter, nor are we quite sure which particular congregation this was written for, but nevertheless, it was written for the sake of providing a strong pastoral encouragement to a church in crisis. This church was discouraged, to the point some of them were giving up on even gathering together for worship and study. Hebrews 10 says “**23** Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. **24** And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, **25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” One theologian suggests that they are discouraged because they kept waiting on the return of Jesus and it just wasn’t happening at the speed they wanted.

Each of these people in this congregation we read about had his or her own story, and each of them was part of their faith community's story, and they were all part of God's story. My story, Our story, God's story.

Individual stories and communal stories are not unique to this congregation found in Hebrews. All throughout the Bible and throughout history, we get to read and reflect on their stories and how it intersects with what God is doing in this world. Reflection on stories is what helps us grow and learn. When we know better, we do better. It's important to tell stories so that we don't forget our past, our heritage. No matter how good, bad, or embarrassing it may be.

Paul Baxley, who currently serves as the Executive Director of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Global, wrote an article this week that reflects on part of our Christian heritage. It's a part of our heritage that I'm sure any of us would rather sweep under the rug and forget, but we can't. This Tuesday, August 20, marks the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved persons in what was to become the United States of America. In his article he wrote "Jesus declared his mission is to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives, white Christians have participated proactively in systems that keep people in poverty and captivity. Across the denominational spectrum in the United States, and particularly among white Baptists, the painful and difficult truth is that by preaching and other action we played an active role in creating a world where slavery and other structures were both permitted and blessed." This was a difficult article for our own Paul Baxley to write, but this was the hard part of "our story" as Christians in this

country. By reflecting on this part of our history, we now know better, and we can do better.

As we read Hebrews, this congregation was struggling, so the author of this letter draws their attention to their past. But the stories shared in this passage are meant to encourage them, offer hope, and re-direct them to think about how their faith joins the faith of those before them and will inform their future. Their faith will help them focus in on being followers of Jesus instead of being discouraged by their present-day distractions. The author starts reminding them of key people they would recognize as part of their history. (and we know that these people are also part of our history) “By faith, Moses led the people through the Red Sea, by faith, the walls of Jericho fell, by faith Rahab was obedient to receive people in her home, etc.” The list becomes so long that the author basically says “look, this list of folks who have gone through things in the past is so long that I just don’t have time to list them all out!” All of these people before you have their own story, and their story became part of your story (our story). The writer encourages them and my own paraphrase of this passage is that they can learn from their ancestors so they can more fully lean into God’s story for the world. In a commentary by our own Mary Foskett, she writes **that the key for the author of Hebrews is that faith discerns where real life is to be found, knows which values are true and which are counterfeit, and endures hardship in the face of divine promise.**

(Repeat it)

Ironically, I imagine the author of this letter would write the same thing to us today.

Perhaps the letter to us would sound more like “By faith, [Gary] survived two out of three church buildings being torn down. By faith, Emily survived part of the sanctuary ceiling falling down and led her congregation to faithfully worship in a new space. By faith, you survived counseling for the very first time to save your marriage, by faith you endured depression and anxiety and sought out the help you needed, by faith, you survived the pains of loneliness in the darkest hours of the night, by faith, you pressed through the demands of work to make the right decisions, By faith... YOU sat in a hospital room not sure what life would be after that surgery....By faith, Randall Lolley persevered in the face of conflict to fight for the rights of all people to do what God has called them to do. By faith, Charlotte endured the difficult road of paving the way for women to do what God has called us to do, by faith Martin Luther King, Jr. marched for the civil rights of all people because as a follower of Jesus, he knew it was the right thing to do.

Yesterday, our family had what you might say is an adventurous day. The kind of day that created the story that will be re-told every year. My little niece Anna celebrated her 1st birthday with a pool party yesterday. Lots of family and friends were there and we all gathered around her as she sat in her high chair ready to receive the famous “smash cake” as they call it these days. (Explain a smash cake). Her big brother William stood in front of me, wide-eyed and smiling as we all sang Happy Birthday. Anna was smiling and enjoying all the attention and quickly started to dig in to her cake. Soon after, sweet Anna started showing signs that something was wrong - very wrong. Large welts began to pop up on her small frame and she was having trouble breathing.

Her mom, my sister-in-law, who happens to be a nurse practitioner, sprung into action and rushed baby Anna out of the pool area. Within 5 minutes, an ambulance comes racing in to the neighborhood and they wasted no time putting our tiny little Anna in the back of that ambulance, giving her the medicine she needed and placing breathing equipment on her to open her airways. In those ordinary moments of living life with our family, we all paused, offered up our silent prayers and some spoken prayers among family and friends, and prayed for our baby girl as she was rushed to Duke Children's hospital. Our faith in that moment was fully revealed in our ordinary life. We weren't afraid of trusting God no matter what happened to her. We weren't afraid to verbalize our fears and at the same time, our trust in God as followers of Jesus. Anna is okay and was ready to party all night long after they gave her the medicine she needed. She kept the nurses hopping all last night and is all smiles today, but even if she hadn't been okay, our faith would have remained the same. In our ordinary life, our faith in Jesus should always inform how we respond and live.

There is a wonderful counselor over at the Trinity Center here in town that gave me a beautiful example of life. She talks about the masks we put on and show the world. Our professional mask (hold up one hand) and our more intimate/personal/vulnerable/faith mask (hold up the other hand). Then she asked the question, at what point do these overlap? This is scary for most all of us. The very thought of telling each other what we are most afraid of, where we doubt, where we get discouraged with our faith, when we feel frustrated with a friend, family member, church member, when we feel fearful of stepping out in faith and taking a risk and doing the very thing God is calling you do.

Lining up those personal things with what you actually show the world - that is scary and hard and one of the most freeing and beautiful things you'll ever do.

When I, or you, can be more honest and vulnerable about these two and pull them closer together, I can be more confident in "My story," whatever that story may be. One filled with awesome things, one filled with hard and challenging things, struggles, celebrations, all the things. When we are more faithful and honest with who we are, when we can take a moment and reflect on the stories that have shaped each one of us, when we ask the question "what is MY STORY?," then we can be more fully connected and engaged in "OUR STORY." The story of our faith community as we journey together. Our story that involves great leaps of faith as we live more fully into all God is calling us to do. Our story of a bunch of imperfect people serving a perfect and living God. Our story that involves people from all walks of life with all different life experiences. And then we start to see how our story is part of GOD'S STORY. Something much bigger than we will ever understand or imagine. God's story - one filled with redemption, reconciliation, love, truth, freedom, releasing the things we cling so closely to and opening our hearts and hands to receive the abundant life found in Jesus Christ, the very pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We then start to realize that we are always surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses of all who have come before, therefore WE are ALL the face of discipleship as we follow Jesus, and suddenly we realize that each of us are becoming part of the great cloud of witnesses that will encourage and point others to faith in Jesus. MY STORY, OUR STORY, GOD'S STORY. Amen.