

Pioneer and Perfecter

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Hebrews 11:29-12:2
on August 31, 2025, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

It's been a rich few weeks with you as we've explored the Letter to the Hebrews, learning what it means to be Christian and encouraged in our faith. Last week, we heard from the beginning of chapter 11, encouragement to the second generation of Christians alongside stories of the faithful throughout the ages. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for," the writer says, "the conviction of things not seen." But by faith, he claims, ordinary humans do the extraordinary work of God. This "roll call of the faithful" which told of Abel, of Enoch, of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Joseph, of Moses and the Israelites, and on and on the list goes. Our passage for today picks up right there, and continues these stories of faithfulness through all the twists and turns of life's path. For to the writer, these were extraordinary circumstances of their trust: shutting the mouths of lions, and quenching raging fires, and escaping swords; surviving poverty and violence and imprisonment; wandering and suffering and laboring, all who "did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect."

Perhaps we'd have to ask Abel and Enoch and Gideon and Rahab and all the rest to be sure, but I doubt any of these folks were faithful because they were trying to show off their faithfulness. They weren't looking for an audience or trying to be an example for others, because if they were, they'd miss the point of their witness.¹ But *in* their faithfulness, *through* their faithfulness, through their unwavering commitment to trust the God who

¹ Fred Craddock, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, "Hebrews 11:39-40," p145.

animated their lives, their lives have encouraged countless ever since. They became the great cloud of witness.

“Therefore,” – because of all who have come before you – “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race 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.” And let me just read one more verse: “consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.”

You see, the cloud of witnesses, the roll call of the faithful surround us, bearing witness to us with their lives, but the source of their faithfulness, the animator and enlivener of their labor was Jesus! The writer of Hebrews calls him the “pioneer and perfecter” – pioneer, meaning originator or founder, the one who authors the path; and perfecter, meaning completer or fulfiller, the only place in scripture where this word is used.² Jesus is beginning and end, alpha and omega, founder and fulfiller of God’s way of Love. And it is because of him that the faithful can look away from the world, not letting that weight hold them down, and look to Jesus to carry on, go on, move on, keep on for the road ahead.

I’ve loved this passage for years, but this year in particular, I’m finding myself drawn to the spirit of endurance and perseverance it lifts up. I read between the lines of catastrophe that the faithful endured, imagining the common, everyday, ordinary, moment by moment living with Jesus that enabled them to face crises with boldness and hope. And I find myself

² Ibid., p148.

encouraged that when we face the catastrophes of our age, ordinary faithfulness found within the holy combination of the great cloud of witness, the throwing off of the weights, and looking to Jesus, our pioneer and perfecter, these become the ingredients fortifying us to persevere on this way.

II.

I wonder – do you feel that too? Through many dangers, toils, and snares, we who are Christians in this context of 2025 may not be threatened with having to shut the mouths of lions or be sawn by swords in half. But I imagine you feel the heaviness of these days. This week on our staff retreat, we talked about the heaviness each of us felt. “The world is just... *heavy*,” we named.

And in the heaviness, for us and likely for many of you, questions flood our minds. Is my devastation greater for the children swept away by floodwaters, the children murdered at school, the children bombed in Gaza, or the children without enough to eat within a mile of our church? Should I be more afraid of the vaccine skeptics disrupting our country’s public health, or the AI revolution that may put millions out of work, or the arresting of Americans off the street with no due process? I feel outrage today – but is it more at the money mismanagement in the WSFCS school district depriving our educators and children of jobs for their care, or is it at the unjust systems that have people sleeping on streets and private properties at night because they can’t secure a home? Is my anxiety flaring because I worry for the safety of trans folks, or wonder if the right to marry will be taken away from my married gay friends, or brood over the reality that my daughter has less rights

than I did at her age, or fear what happens when our leaders are trying to find the good in slavery, for God's sake?

And this is but a fraction of horrifying stories filling our airwaves, in which you and I might ask: where is there room for fear and anxiety and outrage within the small confines of an individual life? Can I worry about “the small pieces of a life in turmoil” when the world is on fire?³ Am I allowed to be worried about my kids' friendships and my spouse's business when some families worry if they'll be torn apart by the power of the state? Is it fair to wish my healthy body was a different shape when my friends' bodies are being ravaged by MS, or dementia, or trauma? Am I heartless for fretting over a leaky roof and a wet basement in Winston-Salem, when floods sweep houses and innocent lives down the rivers of Western North Carolina? Why didn't the world stop turning for everyone else when he died, or she left, or they no longer exist as they once did, or it can't be fixed? How do I live when everything around me and within me is screaming in pain, in despair, in grief, in fear? How do I persevere when I can't even plan or prepare, much less hope, for the future? *How can I keep going?*

III.

Something tells me this spirit feels all too familiar to all too many of us right now. So in the spirit of encouragement, let me tell you one of my “keep going” stories, and later I want to hear yours too.

Some of you might remember that in early June 2017, the Special Committee on Facilities and Mission concluded two and a half years of work with a proposal to the congregation, saying that in order to remain in this place that we'd called home for nearly a century, we must downsize our

³ Maggie Smith, *Keep Moving: Notes on Loss, Creativity, and Change*, p164.

physical footprint. Downsizing meant tearing down spaces that held such memory and meaning to our church, *which was hard enough!*, but it also meant closing our beloved Children's Center, the full-day childcare center that housed 150 kids and 50 teachers and administrators each year for nearly 50 years. The Children's Center was one of the best ways we loved and served our community, and closing it was the hardest reality to face.

The week of the church meeting to hear the Special Committee's proposal was also the week that we had to meet with all the Children's Center staff to tell them their jobs would soon come to an end, the week we would tell the children's families that after a certain point, they'd no longer have childcare (and if you've not been a parent relying on full-time childcare, let me just tell you, it was a big deal.) It was the week that our church was the headline story in the Winston-Salem Journal for days, the week we were splashed on the 6:00 local news on every channel, the week that families began to organize in opposition after a merciless town hall with the Children's Center parents in which we were raked all the way over the coals, the week I came home each day in tears, wondering how to carry on. It was also just a week in ministry, which meant tending all the usual responsibilities, increased then because of a recent unexpected stroke from one of our beloved members whose three generations of family in the church each had distinct needs for pastoral presence and care.

The night of the dreadful children's center town hall, I came home late from work after spending time at the hospital with Janice on the way home. Our family had carried acute strain over these months of planning for this very week to unfold. And our kids were aged 4, 2, and 8 months, meaning labor never stopped. The utter exhaustion and grief and fear and loss of that

week atop that long season prior felt inescapable. Bone-deep. Never ending. Those days, I felt like I was walking around under one of those weighted vests you have to put on at the dentist office before they take your x-rays; my body was surely keeping the score. With the gift of hindsight, I can now look back and see that the hard season did eventually give way to another, but at the time, it felt like the heavy weight of that week and its impact would never lift.

After I walked in the door that night, I'd not been home five minutes – still standing in the kitchen telling Josh about the dreadful town hall – when I heard a knock on our side door. I looked up, and there stood one of our longtime members at the time, Bob Edwards, the lines in his face crinkling into a kind smile. I wiped my eyes, trying wildly unsuccessfully to not look like I'd cried the whole way home as I opened the door. “Hey Bob!,” I said with false cheer. And before I could even ask him what had brought him over, he patted me on the shoulder and said, each word deliberately, “I hear you’ve had a hard day.” He tucked an envelope in my hand, an envelope I’d later open and find a little bit of cash inside, and said, “take Josh out for a date sometime soon.” And with another pat and the smile of one who’s known heartache and survived, he turned and walked away.

I will never forget that kindness, not ever, and will always be grateful to Bob for it. The gift wasn't just in the envelope, of course, but rather the gift was in being seen, being cheered on at the precise slog of the marathon when frankly, I wasn't sure I could keep going. “So keep going,” his smile seemed to say. “Keep the main thing the main thing. Keep nurturing what holds when headlines fade.” And you know, as he turned to walk away, I could have sworn I heard him say, “keep your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

IV.

Then and now, I remain convinced that one of the very best gifts of a beloved community of faith is the gift of showing up for each other when we're struggling and staggering, and giving each other the simple encouragement to 'keep going.' Keep going, beloved ones, for you're surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses. Keep going, beloved ones, because all the heavy weights of today are weights to be shared by the One who says, "take my yoke upon you, so that the burden is shared." Keep going, beloved ones, and lift your eyes from all that distracts and worries you here so that you can train them in one place and one place alone – on Jesus, beginning and end, first and last, founder and fulfiller, pioneer and perfecter. Keep going – one move, one practice, one step, one prayer, one kindness, one word at a time. Keep going. Endure. Persevere. As Dr. King said, "If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward."⁴

And when you do, you'll find that those ordinary moves and practices and steps and prayers and kindnesses and words will add up to an extraordinary life and witness. Fixing your eyes on Jesus, you'll find that he is out of the reach of the terrible and tragic. That he sees this world and all that fills it with unflinching clarity, but is not undone by them as we are. That the deepest peace he can offer is, as Frederick Buechner says, "from something whole and holy within himself which sees the world also as whole and holy because deep beneath all the broken and unholy things that are happening in it even as he speaks, Jesus sees what he calls the Kingdom of God."⁵

⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Keep Moving Forward," Spelman College, April 1960.

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections*, p111.

Indeed, I believe that fixing your eyes on Jesus and carrying forth these ordinary acts of a faithful life build a life and witness, such that *you will keep going*. I believe you'll even become the Bob Edwards in someone else's "keep going" story. I believe you'll see pearls buried in fields, and leaven rising in dough, and mustard seeds pressing through even the hardest ground, and wayward ones finding their way home again, *and you will keep going*. I believe you'll look at news and feeds, at broken hearts and wrecked dreams, you will see hope refusing to be denied by despair, *and you will keep going*. I believe you'll find beginnings in endings, new life in death, resurrection in even the unlikeliest of places, *because you will keep going*.

Maggie Smith says, "Do not be led by fear; fear cannot lead you out of the dark. Find whatever bits of hope you can – a trail of even the smallest bread crumbs, even the tiniest pebbles reflecting the moonlight – and follow them."⁶ That trail might be a marathon. Those pebbles might be ordinary acts. That path is one we need God's help to guide our feet. The clouds are filled with the voices of the faithful, cheering us on. But that light, oh the light is unmistakable: the one we call Jesus, pioneer and perfecter, founder and finisher, beginning and end. So friends, "consider him so you may not grow weary or lose heart." The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can not, does not, will not overcome it. Amen!

⁶ Maggie Smith, p67.