

Sermon Aug 11, 2019**(Luke 12: 32-40)****Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

This is a beautiful tribute to our ancestors in faith in the Letter to the Hebrews. It is not just a tribute to their good deeds----- what is held up, rather, is the power of the faith that enabled their actions.

By faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice; by faith, Noah,--- warned by God, respected the warning;---- by faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called.

Today's reading from the Book of Genesis recounts a part of Abraham's story -- the seemingly impossible promise made to him by God, that his descendants would be as the stars of the heavens. And Abraham, an old man with a barren wife, "believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Most of us cannot claim actual, physical descent from Abraham and Sarah, but in a very real sense we may claim them as our spiritual ancestors. Their stories, and the stories of other Old Testament heroes, are part of our heritage. Week by week they are read in our churches and continue to inspire us.

There are many uplifting examples of faith in action. Our faithfulness in hearing and reading the Word of God is essential to the strengthening of our faith. The stories of God's people help shape our own response to God.

They help us to understand what our being Christians in the world involves, what the truths are by which we must live. They provide a framework for all that we do.

The writer of Hebrews tells of a "great cloud of witnesses" by which we are surrounded. Certainly, the biblical heroes are part of this great cloud; and down through the centuries there have been men and women of faith who have added to their number.

The Episcopal Church Calendar commemorates the lives of some of these witnesses. This month two of those we remember are Florence Nightingale---who we will commemorate tomorrow night--- and Jonathan Myrick Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian and witness for civil rights in our own country.

Jonathan Daniels did not set out to be commemorated on our church calendar. He felt called to the priesthood, and so he became a seminarian at the Eastern Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Jonathan was looking forward to a long life as a parish priest.

He would undoubtedly have celebrated the Holy Eucharist week after week and no doubt have faithfully fulfilled the duties of his office. He would have had plenty of opportunities to live out his faith. But fate would have it otherwise.

In March 1965, Jonathan Daniels heard a televised appeal by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., asking for workers to come to Selma, Alabama, to help in the work of securing the right to vote for all citizens.

Jonathan's initial impulse to answer this call was strengthened during the singing at Evensong of the Magnificat, the beautiful song of Mary. "He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things."

"I knew I must go to Selma," Jonathan wrote. "The Virgin's song was to grow more and more dear to me in the weeks ahead." Here we see a living example of faithful witness inspiring faithful witness, though the persons involved were separated in time by 2,000 years.

Jonathan went to Selma, where he lived with the black families that he and others worked with as they struggled to claim their right to vote. On August 14, Jonathan and several others were jailed for participating in a picket line. Released unexpectedly six days later, the freed civil rights workers walked to a small store where they had previously shopped.

Sixteen-year-old Ruby Sales, a black teenager, was the first to reach the door of the store. As Ruby approached, she was met by a deputy sheriff armed with a shotgun ---- who cursed her. Jonathan pulled her aside to shield her from the twelve-gauge shotgun----and took a blast point-blank in the chest. He died on the spot.

In his book, *Brightest and Best*, Sam Portaro theorizes that the man who threatened Ruby Sales that day in August had been taught to fear and hate those who differed from him. He had been taught that to grant someone else -- especially a black someone else -- any entitlement is to, in some way, diminish one's own share.

Jonathan Daniels, on the other hand, nourished by Holy Scripture and the sacraments, encouraged by the example of that cloud of faithful witnesses, had learned faith, hope, and love. On that top step of the little store in Selma, Portaro writes, "fear met faith, greed met hope, hatred met love.

The outcome could have been predicted."

The forces that were at work in Selma in 1965 are at work in the world today. We also struggle with fear, greed, and hatred, even as we thank God for the gift of faith, hope, and love.

These are the same forces that we experience in the events we commemorate at every Eucharist, that we recite when we proclaim the mystery of faith: "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again."

So, if we draw strength from the example of that great cloud of witnesses, even more do we draw it from the power of our Lord Jesus Christ. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews calls us to follow Jesus, to hold fast to Jesus. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings to us 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."

Do not be afraid.