



Rahab and the Spies, Frederick Richard Pickersgill, 1865-1881

August 14, 2022

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

### Faith 3.0

*Prayer: God of all the nations, you rescued your people out of the Red Sea and delivered Rahab from battle; you rescue the lowly and needy from injustice and tribulation. Surround us with so great a cloud of witnesses that we may have faith to live by your word in our time, courage to persevere in the race set before us...*

Last week I highlighted the distinction between faith and facts. How we use our words – our choice of words forms how we frame our understanding of our faith and how we put things together. Mixing up language about “believing in science” for example, does not help us to think clearly either about *belief* or *science*. Science is fact based, faith is not. Faith is based in the (Heb 11:1) “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And we can have faith in other people as well as faith in God. You can have confidence in someone’s abilities even if they haven’t demonstrated them yet to the world.

I’ve co-opted the language of updating operating systems because I want to encourage you to think about this mechanistically: how faith has already been updated – this is not the first iteration or even the second version – the faith we know and have received, so that you’ll understand when the time comes when you’ll need to update it for yourself, AND for those who are coming after you. How will your words, the testimony of your life, be part of the bigger story of faith? Will the example of your faith create problems down the line, or offer hope for those whom you influence?

My Grandfather used to struggle mightily with the strict sabbath observances his generation inherited from previous generations, he was prevented from doing all of the things he loved (working outside, creating things in his shop – all considered “work”) and was restricted to church, eating, reading, and napping. I suspect that sabbath rules have always been widely broken, but my Grandfather was one to follow them. My mother reports that there were usually arguments on Sundays in their home. He chafed under those restrictions.

None of that is a helpful legacy. On the other hand, I continue to be inspired by my Grandparent's humble lives, commitment to work, education for everyone, women's suffrage, civil rights, and sharing what they had. This is a good legacy for the subsequent generations. From my viewpoint.

The letter to the Hebrews is one very long, gorgeous account of faith passed through generations. Scholars encourage us not to read just a part of this book, because the whole book is about the whole book – the whole story of salvation history. It's like the opposite of the evening news – an account of everything that went wrong today – rather Hebrews is an account of everything that has gone right. It is a huge account of the story of faith, written to build up the faith of those who hear it, in their particular circumstances. Hebrews begins "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son..." and it goes on and on, reminding us of the way God's people have lived out their faith. How they have been faithful to God under the most difficult circumstances, and how God has been faithful to them. And if you listen for a while, you'll begin to understand that these were real people, and that you very well may be part of this story too.

In the e-connector this week I put a link to a sermon read by Pastor John Stendahl, who is the son of Krister Stendahl... Bishop of Stockholm, part of the Church of Sweden... Krister Stendahl had a huge influence on his generation. One of the things he gently lifts up in that sermon (which is waaay longer than mine will be this morning) is how he personally, and the entire world wide church needed to change the way that they talked about Judaism. Because the logical outcome of that language – that God had an old covenant with Jews, and a new covenant with Christians – provided the theological framework to allow for a Holocaust, to slip through when we weren't paying attention. Those under something called "the old covenant" can be dehumanized by those who have succeeded them with "the new covenant."

What you hear me say, and preachers in the generations since, is that Jesus, a Jewish man, opened the covenant which God originally had with the children of Israel, to include any and all of us. It is no longer just the Jews who may be a blessing to the world, we all can all be included. We don't earn this opportunity, it has been given to us, specifically by Jesus. No one is denying the legitimacy of Judaism. That is updated theology. You could call it: Faith 3.0

There was no sustained challenge to an Old Covenant/New Covenant dichotomy before World War 2, no one really thought about its global implications systematically. Even though it is based in scripture, we can agree that Jesus saw faith and celebrated faith in unexpected people – lepers, prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors, Samaritans – among inconvenient and vulnerable people. Most of us see ourselves in that list somewhere, and that's good, it means you are not de-humanizing the people around you, if you recognize that all of us make mistakes, and maintain our worth and ability to begin a life of faith from where we are now.

Hebrews describes a cloud of witnesses to faith. (Not in the cloud, but in memory – wait, is that where we got the cloud language for computer memory??) Abraham lived his whole life without seeing the fruition of his faith, the Bible traces this lineage down the

generations, from Adam to Abraham, and from Abraham to Jesus, the same lineage that is at the beginning of the New Testament in Matthew chapter 1, the genealogy of the house of David is also an account of those who have lived by faith. And everytime you hear the story your attention may linger on a different life. This one emphasizes Rahab the prostitute who demonstrated faith by her allegiance to Israel and the Jewish spies, receiving them in peace. She put herself and her household at risk, welcoming the change they were bringing.

There's some violence in this story, some of us have suffered in order to keep faith, some of us have needed to make painful personal sacrifices, some of us are being called upon to do that now. What you need to know is that faith has a special role to play for those who are afflicted, marginalized, who are poor in spirit. That is what makes it a walk of faith and not just easy all the time.

Hebrews 11:39-40 "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, apart from us, be made perfect."

Their faith is still being perfected in our lives. Jesus has made this possible for us, opening this covenant between God and Israel, and inviting us to place our own lives alongside theirs in a great project that God is using to bless the world.

I'd like to end with a quote by — Reinhold Niebuhr from his book: *The Irony of American History*.

*"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.*

*Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.*

*Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.*

*No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness."*

Faith is shared across generations of people. Our faith is inspired by their lives, their faith is being perfected in us, and our faith will be perfected in the future. The great cloud of witnesses continues to accept updates, make sure to make your own updates to our shared work of faith.

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