

I imagine that the letters in the New Testament were written with varying degrees of haste and emotion. Paul wrote an angry letter to the church at Corinth. You can just tell that he had a lot of stuff he needed to unload. On the other hand, the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Thessalonians consists almost entirely of prayers and praise. When Paul wrote his letter to Philemon, he told his friend and former slave, Onesimus, to personally deliver it. It could have gotten there a lot faster if it had gone by the regular mail, but Paul wanted this letter hand delivered.

Then there was the letter written to the Hebrews, from which our scripture text for this morning comes. It was a thick scroll. Probably took three or four stamps to mail. It might have even been sent priority mail—there is such a sense of urgency about it. The moment you open the bible to this letter, you know why. *Hold on*, it says. How many times does the author write—“hold on.” Don’t shrink back. Don’t despair. Don’t give up. Stir up each other. Encourage each other. Don’t stop going to worship. Don’t get discouraged. Don’t ever give up hope. All the way through that is the tone. The writer, who is a pastor, wants to revive a church.

So we wonder what is wrong with his people. When you read the letter you discover that it had been a church that was full of love and joy and fellowship. But there were strains. Between that time of wonderful joy and the writing of this letter something difficult has happened to this church.

If you read the letter carefully there seems to be some heresy that has infected the church. Chapter One makes it clear that there are some that have gotten all caught up in angels. We can understand that. Angels are very attractive to people these days, too. A dear lady in my former church told me how much she loved the TV show, “Touched by an Angel,” and waited for me to engage in conversation with her about it. I was too embarrassed to tell her that I didn’t watch it as it was on opposite the Simpsons. But the problem is probably not about angels or heresy.

The passage speaks to the growing persecution felt by Christians. The author writes that although they have not resisted still they have had their property confiscated and there has been social ostracism. But that is not the problem of the church either. Truth is, persecution always makes a church stronger, not weaker.

So if the primary problem is not heresy or persecution then what is it? If we read the letter carefully, I think that the real root problem here is that these good people have simply grown tired. We should never say to ourselves—well, I was just tired. When you are tired you are a different person. The way we talk to our children, the way we talk to our spouse, the way we talk to each other, can all be gravely affected by weariness. This is why the pastor of the church in Jerusalem encouraged his followers not to grow weary in well doing. Fatigue can be faith’s greatest enemy. It can be life’s great enemy.

The road for these Christians was turning out to be longer than they thought. There was a time when they ended up every one of their worship services on a note of hope and joy. But at the writing of this particular book, the church was now celebrating its 65th birthday. There had been many losses in the community, the same people were doing the same jobs, over and over, the church needed funds to keep going, and they were exhausted. So here is a church that has gotten a little tired.

A pastor who is mounting a valiant effort to bolster this church writes the letter of *Hebrews* trying his very best to restore its joy. He is trying to bring back the delight that they had in being a faith community, dedicated to doing the work of the church.

He takes them down the Hall of Fame. There they all are, he says. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachael. They are all sitting up there in the bleachers waiting to see how you are going to continue to run the race. They all died before they received the promise and apart from us they will never be made perfect. Apart from us they will never know the completion of their own pilgrimage. For their sake, for God's sake, he says, pick yourself up. These are some of the saints who went before. You are the saints of the church now.

Why is this pastor trying so hard to infuse energy into this church? It is evident to me that he is doing it because he cares. And care sometimes intrudes. It has the wrong timing, says the wrong thing, makes mistakes. But one thing that care never does is to completely give up. This pastor cared for this church.

The church needed to be there—needed to be there for its people, needed to be there to be a voice of conscience, needed to be there as a sign that not everyone thinks the same way as the mainstream. There are still safe places, its presence says, there are still places that you can walk into, and if you treat the people there with some respect, then they will give the same back to you. I'm thinking this week about how churches will reach out to the families of miners trapped in the mines, and the families of those who went and tried to rescue them. I'm thinking about how our national church will use our One Great Hour of Sharing collection and use it to help the people of Peru in the aftermath of the great earthquake last week. And, I'm thinking about how our own church will help the community around us, and the community gathered here to collect enough strength to continue to run the race that has been before you.

People need to know that the church cares. People need to know where pockets of hope exist.

I can tell you about one such person, as I have been thinking about her lately. Some years ago, a first-generation Armenian woman contacted our church. Would I perform her wedding? We needed to act fast—her former husband was dying. While we were meeting in my office, I learned that she and her husband had drifted apart, each thinking the other did not care, and each believing there was no hope for their marriage. They had divorced over fifteen years ago. They never had a church home, and she had called on me because she used to look up at the neon cross lit up on our roof, and she had often wondered if there could be hope inside that building. Today was the first time she was setting foot in my church. Would she find hope here after all? She was nervous. She needed help getting her license because of the language barrier, although she spoke well enough for me to understand, so I went with her to the license bureau and helped her through the process.

Their grown children knew that they still loved each other, and had gone back and forth between parents over the years trying to bring them together again. Finally, when he was very ill and in the hospital, she asked him to marry him again, and he said, "yes."

I arrived at his room in the oncology ward at Queen of Angels Hospital with a portable communion set, our Book of Worship and a stole. Inside (and unknown to me) church members had dressed the room for a wedding. They had never met these people before, but they knew what a wedding was supposed to look like, and they worked their crepe-paper magic upon the room as he lay in his bed, and brought an old vase with fresh flowers, which they left behind them.

The grown children and their spouses were standing there when I arrived dressed in black and white and clutching handkerchiefs. There were a couple of nurses as guests. The groom had been dressed for this day in a suit and tie that looked too large for his frame, but he reached up and took the hand of his bride, who stood by his side beautifully dressed and coiffed. She looked radiant, and she introduced me to her family.

The portable food tray was the altar, and I stood at the foot of the bed and we began with the breaking of bread and the passing of the cup, and finally the words, “Do you take this man?” and “Do you take this woman?”

This had to be one of the most memorable weddings I will ever look back on; in hospital lighting with crepe paper streamers gently falling around a groom who drank the cup of blessing through a straw in a plastic cup with the assistance of his new-again bride, this was one of the most beautiful weddings you could ever hope to attend, made more beautiful by loving people who cared.

Together we commit to the assurance of things hoped for, together we live the conviction of things not seen, together we join as strangers and pilgrims, seeing, welcoming through the mist and fog on the horizon, a promised homeland.

“Therefore – since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also set aside all of the every weight,” the stuff that drags us down—(the indifference, the fear, the sluggishness, the procrastination, the doubt, the distractions) “that cling so closely to us, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

Why are you here? What is next? It is for you to write. It is for you to act upon. It is for you to pass on so that another generation will feel compelled to pick up where we leave off and continue to build a better world. “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 they cannot be made perfect.” They—the long line of witnesses of disciples and Hall of Fame types—Peter, Paul, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Abraham and Martin and John.

That means we are in the chain, too. We do not just celebrate the heroes of the past, and some of them are here with us; we stand in their line, arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder with them, their work lies incomplete without us – you, and you, and you and you. Got that? The perfection of their work depends upon ours. You and you, and you and you—you bring us the new legacy that all the saints who from their labor rest began. You, and you, and you and you have come here as a fresh cloud of witnesses to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

*Hold on*, says this pastor. Don’t shrink back. Don’t despair. Don’t give up. Stir up each other. Encourage each other. Don’t stop going to worship. Don’t get discouraged. Don’t ever give up hope. What is next? You will write that chapter. Help me and all who are here to write it well.

Amen.

### ***Sermon Resource***

Lectionary suggestion 15C, no known or credited author.

James W. Crawford, “Strangers and Pilgrims”—the influence of this sermon is felt in the last few paragraphs enough that I need to credit him. (And encourage anyone to read him!)

## Scripture for Sunday, August 19, 2007 Proper 15C

### Hebrews 11: 29 - 12: 2

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 Ra'hab 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, Bar'ak, Samson, Jeph'thah, 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, apart from us, be made perfect. 12:1 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.