

September 7, 2008

“The Race / The Flood”

Last week we begin a journey that follows the great people of faith in the Bible as found in Hebrews Chapter 11. We also began to look at great people of faith, if fact, martyrs who followed the time of Christ. In Hebrews 11, we saw that faith is the assurance of what is hoped for; that is heaven; for it is the certainty of what is not seen; that is God and His promises. And it is what the ancients were commended and what enables us to understand that God created the world.

It was faith that led Abel to offer a sacrifice of his first fruits, a sacrifice that certainly cut into his income and profit potential. And it was faith that led Jim Elliott and his four companion missionaries to offer their lives for the salvation of the Waodanis Tribe. They all understood what Jim Elliott meant when he said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Today, we look at another aspect of faith, the faith of someone who is older. A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that we never retire from the race of faith. In this mornings new testament reading, we hear of Noah, who, “when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family.” Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, Hmm, that sounds like the second part of the Biblical definition of faith. The certainty of what is not seen. Noah hadn’t seen God, but he was certain He existed and that His Promise, a flood to destroy all the world, was true. Yet it’s much more than that. When we look at the creation account in Geneses 2, verse 5, we see that the earth was watered by a mist that went up from the ground, because, “the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land.” So when God told Noah to build an ark, because He was going to send rain to destroy all living things that had the breath of life in it, Noah probably had two questions. First, what’s an ark? And second, what is rain? Yet because he had faith and was certain of what he had not seen, he began to build an ark or a ship. Something unknown to mankind because of the coming rain, which no one had ever seen or even heard of. But its more than building what he did know because of what he hadn’t seen; Noah began this at the ripe old age of about 500 and completed it at the age of 600. Now I know people lived longer back then, but we can do a little mathematics here and put it into proportion. Proportionately speaking, that

would be like someone today who is in their early sixties starting this project. On top of all that we must add two other obstacles. First of all, this ark was truly built by hand. No power tools! A week ago I worked on taking a stump out of the ground. Because of its location, I was limited to the use of a shovel and an ax. After four hours of work, I was tired, sore and an absolute mess. I looked at that stump and I thought, "I am a wimp!" How in the world did Noah do this for 100 years? But the second obstacle was, his neighbors. Can you imagine what his neighbors were saying? "Your building an Ark? Because of Rain? And your going to put two of every kind of animal on this ark? And you've been doing this now for 100 years and your doing it because God told you to? Noah, get a grip! That wasn't God talking. You ate something that didn't agree with you. Maybe it was mushrooms or something, but Noah, get a life, there's more to life than building a ship because of rain that we've never heard, of so that all the animals can live on it and, because you heard God tell you this". I can just imagine the ridicule that he went through. But, Noah in spite of his age, in spite of the obstacles, in spite of his neighbors, he built an ark and it was commended to him as righteousness.

Some may say, well that was Noah, no one else has a faith like that! Really? I would like to introduce you to Polycarp of Smyrna. He was born around AD 70. He came to the Christian faith through the teaching of the Apostle John and he is known as both a disciple of John and a champion of the faith for Jesus Christ. I'd like to share his story with you.

An elderly man in his eighties sat at a table eating dinner. Polycarp knew his life was in danger. A group of Christians had just been executed in the arena on account of their faith. But Polycarp refused to leave Rome. The Romans were executing any self-proclaimed Christians and pagans were betraying those they knew to be Christians. After the recent executions the crowd in the arena had chanted for Polycarp's death. Recently, the Roman proconsul had been looking for him for days. After arresting and torturing one of Polycarp's servants, they finally learned where he was staying. The soldiers came in to the house, but instead of fleeing, Polycarp calmly stated, "God's will be done." Polycarp asked that food be brought for the soldiers and requested an hour for prayer. Amazed by Polycarp's fearlessness, especially for a man his age, the hardened Roman Soldiers granted his request. He prayed for two hours for all the Christians he knew and for the Universal Church and the soldiers let him.

As Polycarp entered the stadium, several Christians present heard a voice from heaven say, "be strong Polycarp and act like a man." Because of his age, the Roman Proconsul gave Polycarp a final chance to live. He just had to swear by Caesar and say, "take away the atheists." Now you have to understand, at that time, Christians were called atheists for refusing to worship the Greek and Roman gods. You see, the Christians didn't believe in the "gods" and therefore they were atheists. Polycarp looked at the roaring crowds, gestured to all of them and proclaimed, "take away the atheists." The Proconsul continued "Swear and I will let you go, reproach Christ!" Polycarp turned to the Proconsul and boldly declared, "86 years I have served Him and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" The proconsul urged him again, "swear by the fortune of Caesar!" but Polycarp replied, "Since you vainly think that I will swear by the fortune of Caesar as you say and pretend not to know who I am, listen carefully, I am a Christian!" The Proconsul threatened, "I have wild beasts, I will throw you to them if you do not repent." Polycarp replied, "Call them! For we cannot repent from what is better to what is worse. But it is noble to turn from what is evil to what is righteous." The Proconsul threatened Polycarp with fire, but he responded, "You threaten me with the fire that burns an hour and is soon quenched, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment stored up for the ungodly, but why do you delay? Do what you want." Finally the Proconsul sent a herald to the middle of the stadium to announce that Polycarp was confessing his faith as a Christian. The crowd shouted for Philip the Asiarch to send a lion against Polycarp, but he refused. Then they shouted for Polycarp to be burned. They moved him to the marketplace and prepared the fire. Polycarp undressed and climbed up. When they were going to nail him to the pole, he told them, "I leave me like this, He who gives me to endure the fire, will also give me to remain on the fire without your security from the nails." So they did not nail him but tied him up. Bravely, Polycarp prayed as the soldiers prepared the wood. "Oh Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you; God of angels and powers and all creation and of the whole race of the righteous who live before you, I bless you that you considered me worthy of this day and hour to receive a part in the number of the martyrs and the cup of your Christ for the resurrection to eternal life both of soul and of body in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit; among them may I be welcome before you today by a fat and acceptable sacrifice just as you previously prepared and made known and you fulfilled the deceitless and true God; because of this and for all things, I praise you, I

bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved son through whom be glory to you with Him and the Holy Spirit both now and for ages to come. Amen.” The Romans had threatened Polycarp with beasts and with fire, but nothing would make him turn against Christ. After his prayer the men lit the pire which sprang up quickly, but even the fire wouldn’t touch him as it formed an arch around his body. The Romans didn’t know what to make of this, in the end, the Roman Proconsul commanded that an executioner would stab him and Polycarp bled to death.

Faith is not something that we only exercise when we are young. Noah exercised it. In our Gospel this morning, Simeon and Ana exercised it. Polycarp exercised his faith. But just like anybody else, if you have faith, there are hurdles for you. You may be old like Polycarp, Noah, Simeon and Ana. You may be ridiculed like Noah because of your faith, you may be threatened like Polycarp because of your faith. But our message as we look at each one of these individuals is very simple. Be strong and of good courage, for God has deemed you worthy to join these pillars of faith in taking a stand for your faith. We still talk about and gain inspiration from the faith of Noah and Polycarp. May we become a faithful inspiration to the generations to come!

In our Savior’s name, Amen