

# What More Should I Say?

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**August 14, 2016 (Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost)**  
**Hebrews 11:29-12:2**

If there's ever a "Who's Who" and a "What's What" of Old Testament Faith tradition, it's in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. To its hearers in the first century church, the mere mention of any one of these names or events would evoke instant recognition – just as it would for us today by simply mentioning the name of...say... Michael Phelps. We hear his name and we immediately think of his record-breaking triumphs in the pool (23 golds!), and all of the ups and downs that led to them. I say his name, and we all know the story behind him; I don't need to say another word. So it was for people in the early church. They'd hear the litany in this letter they received and they'd remember those stories of faith with instant recall.

A simple reference to the Red Sea brought to mind a dramatic parting of the waters that let the Israelites escape slavery and cross on dry land.

Talk about Jericho, they'd remember how "Joshua fit that battle, and the walls came a tumblin' down." They'd recall the seven days of marching and shouting and trumpet blowing that helped a wandering people enter the promised land.

Say Rahab, and they'd see her name engraved on a plaque of honor. They'd remember how she provided intelligence to Israelite spies. They'd remember how she hid them in her home at great personal risk, and how her life was saved.

Mention Gideon, and the early church would think of a man who, was asked to pare his army of 32,000 down to a measly 300, and then successfully resist tens of thousands of invading troops with lit torches, blasting trumpets, shouting, and smashing jars.

Speak of Barak, and they'd know that he and his poorly armed battalion prevailed against Sisera's army.

Utter Samson's name, and in their minds they'd rehearse the story of someone so strong he could kill a lion, vanquish the Philistines, and escape from shackles before he'd die a heroic death.

Talk about Jephthah, and they'd recall a leader who defeated yet another rival.

Then there's David, the boy who took five smooth stones to slay Goliath. He could soothe moody old King Saul with his music. He became a refugee to escape Saul's jealous rage. He rose to later become king, establish a dynasty, and achieve military victory.

And Samuel – dedicated to God by his mother Hannah, apprenticed as a boy to serve in the temple, prophet who was instrumental in naming Saul and David king.

These are all stories of faith that were central to people in the early church. And it doesn't begin to cover the faith chronicles of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses recited before these.

And as the early church recalled their faith heritage, they also knew the shortcomings that accompanied them. The former Israelite slaves repeatedly complained and turned to idols. Rahab employed herself in a profession of ill repute. Gideon wavered in faith, and claimed privilege he did not earn. Barak's trust in God faltered. Samson gave up the secret of his strength and thus all of his power. Jephthah sacrificed his only child because of an ill-conceived

vow. David's lust after a married woman led him to order her husband into a battle he couldn't survive. None of these exemplars are perfect. There is no one unsullied. Yet God was merciful to them. The characters are not flat, but full. They are complex, and filled with contradictions.

And so are the stories of faith. Some are immensely satisfying – the triumph of the underdog, the promise fulfilled, weakness overcome, justice realized. And some bear heartache and persecution and wilderness experiences. Some of them are even downright uncomfortable, especially the militant tales.

Yet here in this rapid-fire, sometimes puzzling, even contradictory litany of faith, the epistle writer commends the early church, and us, to engage this tradition. Look back at the stories of our faith heritage.

Better yet, wrestle with them, in all of their messiness – which means, in part, to acknowledge that even as we hear the same stories, we also hear them with *different ears*.

The early church heard them with the ears of small community struggling in the midst of an oppressive empire. *They* heard them as a people dismayed by hostility, ridicule, and shame. However, *we* hear them with the ears of those whose homeland is a world power. The majority of us also hear them with the ears of the dominant racial and cultural and even class identity. And each of us hears them with the ears of our own personal experience.

Still, engage the tradition, not to look back for its own sake, but in order to look forward. Wrestle with it, struggle with it - not uncritically, but engage it, nonetheless, to seek the hand of God at work throughout history and in our own lives. Seeking God's saving work in the past helps us to see God's saving work through Christ in the present and into the future. That in itself is an act of faith.

Theologian Douglas John Hall says that genuinely knowing and grappling with the richness of our religious and Scriptural tradition, and deploying it to serve Christ in the world, is the essence of Christian faith. He says that we need it in order to grope for truth in the here and now.<sup>1</sup>

And in saying that, Hall makes a helpful distinction between tradition and traditionalism. Traditionalism gets stuck in the past. Traditionalism elevates past expressions above all else. But profound engagement with our Christian faith tradition carries "all who are impelled to embark on it" to contemplate the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

When those in the earliest church could not see past their present difficulties into God's promised future, in effect, the epistle writer told them, "Do you want to see the promise? Do you want live by faith? Do you want to see what's possible in God's realm?"

Look to see what God has already done. Look to see where, through faith, the improbable became possible, where spirits moved, where justice prevailed, where the weak became strong. Look to the heights and depths of what God has done through faith. Trust the God who stayed true to our ancestors. And then, by faith, throw off everything that holds you back, run the race, and never stop looking at Jesus. By faith, persevere, and follow the pioneer and perfecter of faith leading the way."

In the midst of our own struggles, whatever they may be, and in all the places where brokenness and injustice hold power, it's in that faith that we may actually cultivate a moral and ethical and even holy imagination that helps us to truly see God's redemptive purpose for the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith*, 2-12.

<sup>2</sup> Hall, *Professing the Faith*, 310.

This became real to me a few weeks ago. I was in one of many meetings for our Great Schools coalition seeking equity in education for low-income and minority children. We were talking with a local education leader who was sympathetic to our cause and to our proposal that we believe will lead to systemic progress. For all of the support we received, that administrator also suggested that we might have to give up something - that we might have to settle for something less than equity for all children. However, though political realities may in fact be limited, our moral imagination for the future of God's children cannot be limited to anything less than God's new heaven and new earth. As John Shelley wrote, "Often our moral failures are more a failure of imagination than a deficit of good intention and goodwill."<sup>3</sup>

"Faith has an inevitable future thrust," writes Hall. "It hopes for what it does not yet see."<sup>4</sup>

Even though I'm firmly planted in the Presbyterian tradition, my personal faith heritage is one with historic Mennonite roots. It includes the stories of people who migrated from place to place over hundreds of years to escape persecution, in part because of their commitment to pacifism. Those stories witness to God's unwavering presence with them through trial and triumph. They've been foundational for me, even pushing me forward when I don't want to be pushed!

I don't know the particular stories of your own faith forebears; and even if I did, they aren't mine to tell. They're yours to tell. Each of us has our own to reflect on, to wrestle with. And I suspect that within them, there's a gold mine with the potential to light God's holy imagination in each of us.

Yesterday, at a community event on prevent gun violence, several of the speakers could have been preaching right out of today's text. One was a local county legislator talking about his proposal for common sense gun laws to save lives. He alluded to his religious and spiritual motivation. He talked about what he wanted to see happen. Then he said, and I quote, "I believe by faith we can do it."

Another speaker shared her work to prevent gun violence in a high-risk Rochester neighborhood, walking the streets, developing relationships with those harboring grudges and those prone to use lethal weapons, and de-escalating conflict. Why? She'd lost her cousin, killed with a gun over marijuana. She talked about the pain she experienced. She said that for eleven years, every single day she went and sat at the tree where her loved one had died. And then she said: "God used that pain, and it evolved over time." And she spoke of her faith; she spoke of Jesus; and I believe it was through faith that she could envision an alternate future that could transform her own pain, and that of all who are under threat of violence. That is what holy imagination looks like to me, in the here and now.

Friends, since we, too, are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also throw aside every human failing, every sin, every obstacle that weighs us down. And let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, always looking to Jesus, who himself has endured the cross, disregarded its shame, and taken his seat at the right hand of God.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> John Shelley, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, p. 354.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, *Confessing the Faith*, 38, 238, 247, 266ff, 522.