

Spring Lake Presbyterian Church
Rev. Kathryn M. Treadway
August 19, 2007

Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2

²⁹By 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. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection.

³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They 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—³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

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, ²looking 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.

Faith, the Lone Ranger, & Tonto

“A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust, and a hearty 'Hi-yo Silver!' The Lone Ranger!” Thus the sitcom begins as the Lone Ranger rides his trusty steed across the plains, seeking out ways to preserve justice and rectify wrong-doers. *The Lone Ranger* was a story told both on Radio beginning in 1933 and on TV beginning in 1949. Compared to the complexities of human life revealed in modern days, *The Lone Ranger* was simple with one intention: bringing evildoers to justice out there on the plains. There was no “he said/ she said” in the way of Judge Judy or even in today’s “live” courtrooms; there was simply one man with his trusty sidekick Tonto waving a gun and reminding bandits that they could not mess with the order of things.

I watched an old clip from one of the 1949 TV episodes this week and I was struck by the observance that there was really only one person bringing justice, only one ranger riding across the Western plains, yet he didn’t give up on what he believed he was called to do. The masked man daily mounted his trusty Silver and, filled with the encouraging music of the William Tell Overture, the Lone Ranger rode off to fulfill his duty in the world.

In the age where Christendom as we have known it for over two-hundred years has died, at a time where Christianity is no longer the guiding religion or the most adhered to religion in the world, we Christians join the ranking of Lone Believers. We set off across prairies to proclaim God's justice to the people, to embody God's love to the world, to spread God's transforming and counter-cultural ways to the ends of the earth. We do all of this . . . *without* the exciting background music of the William Tell Overture. We do all of this . . . *without* a gun. We do all of this . . . *without* the simplicity encountered in a 1949 TV show. And little by little, we get rattled. We get tired. We ask ourselves, "Is it worth getting up everyday by ourselves to be the Lone Believer in this world?" - because that is frequently what we feel like - the Lone Believer without a fiery horse with the speed of light. There is no cloud of dust or hearty "Hi-yo Silver! The Lone Believer!"

In today's scripture from the letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded of many Lone Believers. We are also reminded that their fate was not always the happily ever after, ride off into the sunset kind of fate. We are reminded of those who have ridden the lonely territories before us. The writer of the letter writes to offer encouragement to those of us feeling that we are the only ones who have ever ridden solo. Remember, the writer tells us, remember that the Israelites left Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, not having a clue how they would make it, but God brought them safely through and led them to safety in the wilderness. Remember, the writer tells us, remember the believers who circled the walls of Jericho, not having a clue as to how the walls would come down, but listening as God allowed them to safely enter Jericho. Remember, the writer tells us, remember the Lone Believer named Rahab, who assisted Joshua and Caleb when they were spying on the new land. Remember Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. Remember that even as each one of these frequently stood out as the Lone Believer, remember that God surrounded them in their faith, offering them hope. The scriptures tell us that these Lone Believers *through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,* ³⁴*quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war,[and] put foreign armies to flight.* ³⁵*Women received their dead by resurrection.* This is the good stuff! This is the stuff that 1930s radio shows and 1949 TV programs are made from!

Yet there are many times when the Lone Believers served God faithfully but were never able to see the hope that they were promised. As you study those believers, you might be tempted to proclaim: There is no hope!

- "There is no point of riding across the prairies!" you might tell me as you remember that Moses never got to set foot in the promised land after leading the people faithfully and wandering aimlessly through the wilderness for 40 years.
- "What's the point?" you might wonder when you discover that Samson was killed when he stood up for his beliefs. And when you read the stories of the prophets, you might tell me that many of them died before seeing that God actually fulfilled the promises.
- "What's the point of riding solo on our trusty steeds (or in our trusty Fords)?" You might wonder as you read that many of the Lone Believers in the past encountered hardship and even terror. The scriptures tell us that *others were tortured, refusing to accept release . . .* ³⁶*Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.* ³⁷*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—³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Faith is not the “feel good” emotion we often think that it is. It doesn’t “feel good” to encounter uncertainty and have faith believing in God’s purpose even if we ourselves have to suffer. And we’re not sure we want to be the rider for that kind of faith either. We would rather ride off into the sunset proclaiming “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will live happily ever after with nothing but sunshine!” but that’s not the whole story of Christianity, is it? If we truly believe, if we really have faith, we do not ask what Christianity can do for us, rather we believe even when it appears Christianity is doing NOTHING for us because of a greater goal, a greater purpose, a greater Love. We believe because we realize that God is the hope of the world, whether we see that future or not. In verses 39 & 40 we hear ³⁹*Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised,* ⁴⁰*since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.* God’s hope for the world is just that, a hope for the WHOLE world . . . not just one of us.

So when we embrace our faith not because of what it can do for us but because it is capable of changing the mentality of the world, we have a mission in this world. We are able to set out as the Lone Ranger did, with a purpose to change hearts one at a time, beginning with our own. We are called to bring the hope of God in Christ to all, for only as we open the kingdom to others will we ourselves be able to be changed into the likeness of God in Christ Jesus.

As you may have seen, I included Tonto in the title of my sermon today. I did so because, in truth, the Lone Ranger was never able to bring justice completely by himself. While the Lone Ranger wrestles a gun away from the bandit, Tonto, the Lone Ranger’s trusty Indian side-kick, stops the bandits’ “back-ups” from causing any more trouble, frequently tying their hands and feet so that the Lone Ranger can take care of business.

We are not alone. We turn on the TV News today and we are convinced that we are the Lone Believers, riding solo across the plains of this world, but the scripture tells us that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. When we set off to take love into the world, we do so with the likes of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Moses, David, Samuel, the prophets, John the Baptist, the apostle Peter, Paul, and Jesus himself. We are surrounded by those who were able to have faith even when they could not see, those who even now see clearly the great purpose of God’s world. We are asked to remember these as we mount our trusty steeds to encounter yet one more day of faith. We are asked to remember when we can’t see, when uncertainty plagues us with sorrow and anxiety, when all hope is gone. And because we trust in the same God as those who have gone before us, those who persevered amidst suffering, we too are able to face another day, to give thanks in all things, to cover our face with a mask so that the only one truly seen is God-in-us.

So go out from here, all you Lone Believers, go out in Faith, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who testify that what you believe is real, even when you can’t see. Go out from this place with a boldness that allows God to be seen amidst the masked-believers that we are. Go out from this place willing to change God’s world by sharing God’s love one person at a time. Amen.