

**SLD11.06.16 32nd Ordinary All Saints
Emory Presbyterian Church
Hebrews 11:29-36, 39, 12:1-4,12-13
The Rev. Jill Oglesby Evans**

“The WHOLE Story”

Hebrews 11:29-36, 12:1-4, 12-13

29 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. 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.

32 And 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.

12Therefore, 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.

3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. ⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Heilsgeschichte. This is the German word we learned in seminary for Holy History. *Heilsgeschichte.* The whole holy story clear from creation through the Hebrew scriptures, through the New Testament of Jesus Christ, to the final fulfillment of God’s Kingdom on earth. This is *Heilsgeschichte*, the whole holy span of salvation history, a glimpse of which the writer of Hebrews is giving us in today’s text. Even though, by the

time we jump in, he's already fast-forwarded past creation and the flood and the patriarchs right to Moses' parting of the Red Sea so the Israelites can escape the Egyptians. Which is why, after tipping a hat to Josuhua and Rahab, he allows as how there's just not enough time to tell the tales of Gideon and Samson, David and Samuel, and the many, many, many other women and men who dedicated their lives over time to God's unfolding *heilsgeschichte*.

So, given the time constraints, he jumps on ahead to J.C., who, as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, is pretty much the point of the whole durn *Heilsgeschichte* in the first place. Only, evidently Jesus can't redeem creation all on his own. To complete the the whole holy history, apparently God also needs all the players that came before Jesus, as well as all the ones who come after, including you and me.

Whoa. You are I are essential to the fulfillment of the *heilsgeschichte*? Put *that* on your resume. God's holy purposes for creation cannot, and will not, be fulfilled without the participation of me and thee. Even the great ones of faith, the titans of our holy history, exemplars of faith and sacrifice, aren't able to tell the whole story to its end. Despite their chosen, and mythical, status even the patriarchs and matriarchs of scripture are not able finally to complete God's purposes, "since," as the writer of Hebrews tells us, "God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect." (Heb. 11:40)

Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Mary, the bent over woman, despite their remarkable faith, God still has something else in mind that will not be complete without the participation of those who came after them. *All* those who come after them. Something that involves the early great ones, to be sure, that is rooted and built on their

lives and witness, yet that can't finally be fulfilled without the faith witness that follows them. As though God's plan does not depend on any one of the Great Ones but on each one of them, and each one of us. And, of course, on each one who comes after us.

Now, this is a novel concept to me - that the fulfillment of those who came before us is somehow dependent on us. Never mind Moses, Rahab and Mary, what about our own parents and grandparents?

I don't know about you but I hail from some pretty heavy duty stock. My grandfather, was Stuart Oglesby, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church for 30 years. His wife, my grandmother, Gongga, was the original strong, wise, resourceful crone who took care of all family and household business so St. Stuart could do his noble, public, ecclesial thing. And those who came after my grandparents, my parents and aunts and uncles, well, so far as I could see, they pretty much ruled the world. And the writer of Hebrews is suggesting that something about *their* lives can only be fulfilled through *my* life? I'd always imagined it the other way around; that I was trying to live up to THEIR lives and expectations. Yet the text insists that, to be made perfect, the fulfillment of God's plan requires not only their lives, but mine, and yours, and everyone else's, too.

Today's passage from Hebrews describes a *heilsgeschichte*, a holy history, that's all of a piece, that won't wrap up without every single participant in the story of our faith, including the cloud of witnesses with which we are surrounded, from which we hail, and of which we are a part. And maybe, maybe, God's *heilsgeschichte* is even bigger than that.

Think of it like one big Milky Way stretching from the beginning of time clear to the Kingdom, with you and me and lots of people we know, or have known, and a whole lot more we don't, all part of a milky mass that swirls and curls its way to the heart of God. Only, when you look up on a starry night outside the city and see the grand opalescent swath of the Milky Way, you can't tell that you're a part of it. That you and your world make up a teeny, tiny, yet essential part of its total mass and being. It can be hard to believe that this particular pulsing galaxy wouldn't be complete without you.

And the reason it's hard to imagine, of course, is because we're smack in the middle of it. The Milky Way is all around us, behind and before us, like an ocean surrounding fish who don't notice the water. This is what the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us is like. We're part of it, an *essential* part; it wouldn't be complete without us. But, except on days like today, we don't think about it much, don't consider the great swath of the faithful of which we are a part, the continuum of a holy history in which we participate, and which is not complete without us.

Only, thing is, it's not complete *with* us, either. 'Cause, I mean, we're talking a *really* big story. And just what is the story?

You recall the book, The Shack, that was so popular a decade or so ago? At one point in it, God, in the form of a black woman named Papa, describes the goal of Her whole holy history. She says that with it, "I purpose to work life out of death, bring freedom out of brokenness, and turn darkness into light."¹ This is *heilsgeschichte* – God's purposes worked out in history. *All* of history. Now that's a big story. Maybe bigger than we realize, than we can even grasp. But certainly bigger than our denominations or doctrines or creeds or affirmations; perhaps - this *heilsgeschichte*

¹ William P. Young, The Shack, windblown media, Los Angeles, Calif. 2007, p. 191.

designed to work life out of death, bring freedom out of brokenness, and turn darkness into light, is even bigger even than Christianity?

That's what Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr believes, that the "Christ Mystery" is much, much bigger than Christianity as an organized religion. Says Rohr, Jesus did not come to create a country club or a tribe of people who could say, "We're in and you're out. We've got the truth and you don't." Jesus came to reveal something that was true everywhere, for everyone, and all the time.

In the hours of the last evening of his life, theologian Karl Barth was working on a lecture in which he wrote, "All live to God, from the Apostles to the forebears of yesterday and the day before yesterday. ...They still speak today. We do not live without them. The members of the first elected people of Israel, the members of the Christian church who were loved by God before our birth—(and who surround us today) - we are, together with them, the complete people of God."²

Well, Rohr expands Barth's view to include far more than the members of the Christian church. Rohr's view includes all faiths, all humanity, all creation. For it is Rohr's belief, and I stand with him, that "God is saving everything and everybody. That (*heilsgeschichte*) is all God's emerging victory, until, as Paul says in I Corinthians, "God will be all in all" (15:28). If Christ is truly the "savior of the world" (see John 4:42), says Rohr, then God's shape, form, meaning, and message are all far bigger than any single religion. And so is Christ. Bigger than any single religion, that is. Speaking to the intellectual, and largely pagan, Athenians, the Apostle Paul is wise enough to say: "God

² Eberhard Busch, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*.

is not far from any of us. For it is in God that we (all) live and move and have our very being” (Acts 17:28).

If we are chosen in Christ, says Rohr, as Paul declares in Ephesians 1:4, the purpose of being chosen is to let everyone else know that they are chosen, too! In other words, the purpose of God’s great whole holy history is not to make a triumphal statement about the Christian religion, but a triumphal statement about the nature of Divine Love—which will finally win the day for all creation. Instead of believing that Jesus came personally to fulfill each of us privately, how about trusting that each of us is here to fulfill the larger purposes of Christ in the world?

God’s plan for the fullness of time, writes Paul in Ephesians, is to gather up *all* things in God, *all* things in heaven and on earth. (1:10) The Greek word here for “fullness” is *pleroma*, which Paul also uses in his writings to describe a historical unfolding, the idea that history, humanity, and yes, even God are somehow growing and coming to a divine fullness. And while we are always in on the deal, so is everyone else.³

It’s not (obviously – I mean, look around) that God has everything worked out already but that God IS working it out through you and me and those who came before us and those who came after us. And not just those of us in this sanctuary, or in this church, or in this denomination or even in this faith, but the great, grand cloud of witnesses of faith, of all faiths, that surrounds us. Each and all essential to God’s *heilsgeschichte* designed to work life out of death, bring freedom out of brokenness, and turn darkness into light.

³ (Rohr https://cac.org/bigger-than-christianity-2016-10-31/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2016-11-Monday)

Through God, Barth says, the communion of saints still lives and participates in our lives; still has a say in what we have to say, still thinks through our thoughts, still sings through our songs, prays through our prayers, acts through our actions. Everybody we've loved in this church, and a whole bunch more we've never even met, are still, through God, alive to us today in what we say, in what we do, in how we are, and how we understand ourselves as a people of God. If we didn't understand that before, surely we do after celebrating the communion who ushered us to this church's 75th Anniversary.

What Rohr challenges us to do is broaden our embrace to include *all* whom God embraces.

And so, on this All Saint's Sunday, we take a moment to acknowledge and join with that grand cloud of witnesses to which Paul refers, to feel the presence and love, the support and blessing of all who came before us, who have already heard the trumpet and been transformed. For surely they know, understand and adore the height and depth and length and width of God's *Heilsgeschichte* . And me, I like to think they're rootin' for us. Praying that we'll come to know and trust God's loving plan for the expansive, generous, loving redemption of the whole mess of humanity, the whole glory of creation, the whole holy story of God's dream for what started with a breath of divine love, and that's we'll get with the program, a program which will not, without each and every one of God's children, be made perfect .

To the glory of God. Amen.