

# WHEN TO LEAP BEFORE YOU LOOK

Sermon, August 18, 2019

Text: Hebrews 11:1-2, 29-12:2

Some of you may remember I used to own a 2002 Chevy Impala, a great car that just wouldn't quit (*I purchased it for my daughter's use from Hurd Auto nine years ago with over 150,000 miles on the odometer thinking maybe it would last a good year or two; we ended up putting eighty thousand miles on it and it just wouldn't quit ... it met its demise, however, when Hannah had a slight accident on Bald Hill Road, and the body damage, though relatively minor, was more costly to fix than the worth of the car!*). The namesake of that trusty car was the African impala, an animal that stands about three feet tall and weighs on average about a hundred pounds. As you may know, these residents of southern and eastern Africa are amazing jumpers. They can leap to a height of over ten feet, more than *three times* their height. One impala leap can also cover a distance greater than thirty feet; that's why these creatures are so adept at evading faster predators such as the cheetah. They can leap and zig-zag and leave predators in their dust! Yet I am told these magnificent animals can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a three foot high wall. You see, impalas will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall.

Some think that is a wise and conservative approach to life. "*Look before you leap,*" goes the old proverb. Do not jump if you cannot see where your feet will fall. How different that approach to life is from the life of faith described in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews: "*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*" In a sense, faith is leaping without being able to actually see where we will fall. That is the kind of faith that the writer of Hebrews is commending. Beginning with the eighth verse which we've looked at these past two weeks, he cites examples: "*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know (and could not see) where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*"

The entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews is one of the greatest affirmations of faith in the Bible. After telling us, "*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*", the author lists for us some of the heroes of faith who have gone on before. . By faith Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, all the people who passed through the Red Sea, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David, the prophets ... all spent their lives believing in a great hope they couldn't see. Each inherited the hope from those who went before. According to verse ten, their ultimate hope was to make it to "*the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*" That hope molded and shaped their lives. It filled their lives. It kept them going. As we talked about these past weeks, being heavenly minded has inspired Christians throughout history to do tremendous earthly good. Living INTENTIONALLY with the hope of heaven made Christians throughout history become healers and helpers and heroes ... because being heavenly minded gives us hope, purpose, it gives us strength, and it gives us reason to do tremendous earthly good while we're here.

Thornton Wilder: "*Hope may be a projection of the imagination, but so is despair. Despair all too readily embraces the ills it foresees; hope is an energy that arouses you to explore every possibility to combat those ills ... Hope tries every door.*" Don't give up hope! Keep moving in the right direction, toward that city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith, these people in Hebrews 11 had hope in that City of God they couldn't quite see yet. As we are told in verses thirteen and following: "*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*"

These men and women of chapter 11 were all ordinary people, people like you and me, people who did extraordinary things in the everyday-ness of life. People of faith are parents and grandparents who honor God and act with integrity by making heroic sacrifices for children (*AND vice versa ... children and grandchildren making heroic sacrifices for parents and grandparents, as we've so recently*

witnessed in our congregation!), people of faith are business people who consistently choose to be ethical, teachers who knock themselves out week after week and year after year to inspire students with greater visions. People of faith are public servants who know leadership is more than just fighting for the spotlight or for a bigger piece of the budget pie; it is seeking the welfare of all the people who entrusted them by placing them in office in the first place. In a word, people of faith do the right thing as best they can, no matter what. They have a vision of that new city, and they move toward it, even making leaps of faith in the direction of that city, and bring others with them, come what may. That's what we do. Even though we might not "get there" in this lifetime, we keep moving toward it. And good things happen along the way.

We call the men and women listed in Hebrews 11 heroes, and heroic they were, but that does not mean they were perfect. They weren't. All people are people, and people are flawed. It's always been true. Remember who some of these people were. Rahab, the ex-prostitute in Jericho. Jacob had been a cheat and a liar in his past. Both he and Rahab are there in the heavenly grandstands cheering us on, saying, "I know how guilty you sometimes feel. We know how bad memories can trip you up. Keep going! Don't let your past have a future!" Moses is there, too, saying: "I know what it feels like when you think you're inadequate for the job. You're overwhelmed; you don't have the words and you don't have the energy. But keep going." Samson is there, and we all know his problems regarding self-control and women. Jephthah is there; he once made an idiotic and rash vow that probably cost the life of his daughter. David is there; he was once guilty of the worst treachery of adultery and murder. And we could go on. These early heroes were not perfect, but God did not give up on them. That's the good news. God didn't give up on them and God does not give up on us. I don't know about you, but that's good news to me. I'm not perfect and you're not perfect. But my hope and prayer is to join this list of heroes, that my life of faith may be an inspiration to others, and that I may have the opportunity to cheer others on as part of the great cloud of witnesses.

Something else about that great cloud of witnesses from chapter 11: Some of them suffered grievously. This is the hard teaching of Scripture. Just because you are a person of faith doesn't necessarily mean the race is any easier. In fact, the race might be more difficult. V. 36: "Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated." Then the writer adds this brief understatement, "The world was not worthy of them." They certainly knew what it was to hurt. There is nothing hard we have experienced that they did not experience as well, in spades. Physical suffering, loss of loved ones, rejection by friends, betrayal by associates ... they know what we are going through. They've been there, and more. Believe me, the people who make up that great cloud of witnesses understand what life can throw at us. They were people who were often disappointed and sometimes suffered grievously, but they did not give up on God. And neither should we.

One last thing to note about these heroes: *They stayed in the race.* Sometimes in the race of life we stumble. Maybe we betray our own ideals. Maybe we just do something really stupid in an explosion of temper. Or maybe the fault really isn't ours, but out of the blue life deals us a crushing blow ... we suffer persecution, we suffer the breakup of a family, the loss of a loved one, a devastating diagnosis, the loss of a job. And we realize that all we can do is just hang in there. Dropping out of the race is just not an option. But dropping to our knees IS. We drop to our knees and pray, "Lord, have mercy on me. I don't know if I can make it another day in this race, but I must if for no other reason than people are depending on me. Help me to make it." Sometimes that is the best that a person of faith can do. We hang in there. We take the blows of life, and by the power of God, we keep getting up off the canvas to the cheers of the crowd in the stands. Call it stubbornness, if you will, but it is a divine stubbornness that says, "God has not created me to be a quitter. God has called me to be a finisher, with His help."

When we can't see where we are going, when we can't see where we are "jumping," look to Jesus. As the author of Hebrews tells us, fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, keep moving toward this One Who is the epitome of goodness and endurance, Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, finished his race, and sat down at God's right hand.

With God's help we will finish, and this great cloud of witnesses is cheering us on to the end.