

“Who Are These?” (Revelation 7:13) All Saints’ Sunday, November 2, 2008

Up in the Scottish Highlands, as William Barclay tells the tale, a little group was discussing heroism. One of them said that, sooner or later, everybody had to practice some kind of heroism. Most of the rest agreed. However, one young man disagreed strongly, and to make his point he turned to an older woman in the group. She looked so ordinary, so serene. You would never guess that she had endured a string of tragedies in her life. Turning to her, this young man said, “Ma’am, what kind of heroism do you practice?” Her answer was not what he expected! Thinking a moment, she answered quietly, “Why, I practice the heroism of going on.”

“The heroism of going on.” That’s quite a concept, isn’t it? And it’s a good image of what a faithful life looks like. We’re talking about perseverance. We’re talking about endurance. We’re talking about trusting the Lord no matter what twists or turns the path of life may take. That’s practicing *“the heroism of going on.”*

I suspect most of us here know exactly what that’s like from personal experience – though we may not think of ourselves as heroes. More likely we think of ourselves as realistic, down-to-earth, or – dare I say it? – just normal Christians. We’re not among those who expect a Christian life to be all sweetness and light. We just turn the channel when we see a televangelist preaching the gospel of health and wealth. For good reason! We know Jesus wasn’t kidding when he said, **“In the world you will face tribulation.”** In fact, some of our favorite promises assume that we will face tribulation. **“God will not let you be tested beyond your ability to endure...”** **“My power will be made perfect in your weakness...”** **“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”** Yes, we know quite a bit about taking life as it comes, and clinging to the Lord come what may. We know quite a bit about the need to keep going on. But heroic? No, we don’t think of ourselves as heroic at all.

Yet, maybe we should. Take a mental journey with me from the “here and now” to the life to come. Take a mental journey with me to the scene John paints in our text. The scene is heaven itself. Around the throne of God we see a great multitude robed in dazzling white – people from tribe and nation, people from every time and place, splendid, glorious, magnificent people, praising God with all their might. Wow, what an amazing scene! And what amazing people! Now, they look heroic! We think: *If only we could see them close up, find out a little more about them!* And guess what? Even as we think this, one of them comes over to us. He says: *I’ll bet you’re wondering: “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”* Which is true. We have our ideas, of course. These must be the spiritual elite, the saintliest saints in heaven. But, of course, we don’t know that for sure, so we answer, **“Sir, you are the one that knows”** -- which is also true. So now he tells us: **“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** And even as he speaks these words,

suddenly we *are* able to see these people up close; we *do* know more about them. And what do we discover? They're very much like you and me. Sure, some of them were heroes in the usual sense. Over here, we see some great leaders like Martin Luther. Over here, some great saints like Mother Teresa. Over here, we see martyrs who died for their faith. And over here, we see tireless missionaries, evangelists, and advocates for the poor. But what shines brightest in many of these people is a kind of faithfulness that during their life on earth largely went unrecognized. In spite of grinding adversity, they trusted the Lord to get them through. In spite of senseless tragedies, they leaned on the Lord for support. In spite of setbacks and failures, hardships and disappointments, they remained "**faithful unto death.**" Now they have received "**the crown of life.**" And to our surprise, they look just as heroic as the others! Did these people lead perfect lives? No. Like everyone in heaven, they were saved by grace; *needed* to be saved by grace; needed to **wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb.** But the wonderful thing is: God's grace triumphed in them; in their perseverance, in their endurance. And precisely *that* was their heroism: they practiced "*the heroism of going on.*"

Now, this journey to heaven is imaginary, but the point is real and true. We must never underestimate this kind of heroism – especially its value in our own lives. I don't want to take anything away from the people this world calls heroes. No doubt they are entitled to whatever applause they get. But let us be clear that the most important applause is the applause of heaven. The most important praise is the praise that God gives: "**Well done, good and faithful servant!**" And however much this world may celebrate the one-time hero who does one big thing with special courage, what will matter more in eternity is showing courage over the long-haul – the courage of our convictions, the courage to put God first, the courage to trust Him wherever He leads us, whatever life dishes out, however dark the situation, even when it costs us dearly; the courage to trust God in the spirit of Job: "**Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.**" That is the *truest* heroism – the heroism of going on!

So if we find that kind of heroism in ourselves – even the tiniest bit – let's not undervalue it. *Oh, that's nothing special, just plain, ordinary faithfulness.* To the contrary! That kind of heroism is precious! In fact, that is the kind of heroism we want to cultivate – especially these days.

You know, in every age, the church has its strengths and weaknesses. These days, our strengths include deeper concern for the poor, more creative worship, greater openness to people who differ from us, and reluctance to judge those who fall. On the other hand, one real weakness is a tendency to dwell on "Why me?" It's the attitude: *If there really is a God, and He is a God of love, then shouldn't He spare me any hardship or pain? So what's up with this hardship and pain? Why me?* And along with this attitude, comes spiritual impatience: *Okay, I'll pray for help and wait a little while, but if God doesn't turn things around, he's letting me down, and then what's the point of still trusting Him?*

Now, that description may be a little blunt and perhaps a little exaggerated, but you know the kind of attitude I'm talking about. And it's not healthy. It's not helpful. In fact, it's counter-productive. It undermines faith precisely when it is needed the most. I mean, who knows better what it takes to make the most of this life – people or God? Who knows better what it will take to grow and mature to their full potential? Who knows better what the future will hold and how to prepare for what's coming – people or God? And who knows better what things ultimately matter? These days, some people treat God as if He were just a tool they can use to make life more comfortable and throw away if He doesn't work the way they want. You and I know better than that! You and I know that, if anything, we are called to be God's tools, ready to be used any way He wants. And more to the point, you and I know that what ultimately matters is trusting Him – trusting Him every step of the way through this life until He brings us to our heavenly goal. After all, this life is just preparation for something infinitely greater. This life is just the prelude, not the main event. This life is meant to shape and mold us for the life that lies ahead. And how is that going to happen – at least, happen effectively – unless we let God do it His way, in His time, on His terms? Yes, you and I know full well that what ultimately matters is trusting God – trusting Him, come what may, over the long haul. And that's not easy. In fact, at times nothing is harder. But that is what makes it heroism, precisely the kind of heroism we need to value, practice, and cultivate: *the heroism of going on*.

Now, today is the feast of All Saints, so I naturally think of Christians I've known who have practiced such heroism. This year, the list is especially rich. I think of **Patti Roberts** – crippled with arthritis most of the years I knew her, yet always so positive, even humorous; and always drawing on God's grace for the strength to stay that way. She practiced the heroism of going on! Or I think of **Al Miller** – so supportive of his church, always so ready to pitch in, even when old age slowed him down...a bit. He, too, practiced the heroism of going on! Or I think of **Helen Skogen** – so attentive to fellow members at Alterra, even though blindness made it harder. And **Bob Fulton**, who spent a lifetime battling terrible illnesses, yet never let it break his spirit or shake his faith. And **Pat Hardman**, who could have been so bitter over childhood tragedies, but instead showed such an attitude of gratitude, and did whatever she could for her Lord and loved ones – up to the very end. They, too practiced the heroism of going on.

Such stories could also be told about other members who died this past year, not to mention many more who passed away earlier and many more who are still going strong. And just telling the stories makes it clear – doesn't it? – what value there is in trusting God, and enduring, and persevering. Just telling the stories makes it so clear that true heroism is really about character, not appearances. It's really about commitment and determination, not just specific achievements. Most of all, it's about courage – faith-fostered courage – that is willing to endure the bitter, and brave the difficult, and slog through the hard times, whether anyone applauds or not. Yes, just telling the stories makes it so clear why we need to value, and practice, and cultivate the heroism of going on.

Especially when we think how the stories end. Especially when we think about our own story and how *it* will end. So, in closing, let's do just that. Let's think back to the scene in our text where we see the glorious multitude gathered around the throne of God in heaven. **“Who are these, robed in white?”** Why, they are all just believers who kept going on, aren't they? One day that crowd will even include us. And in the light of eternity, think what it will be like to realize: *Hey, I made it through “the great ordeal” – the great ordeal called life! And look! God's grace was sufficient for me! His power was made perfect in my weakness! How many times did I think I couldn't make it one step further? Thank God I trusted Him anyway and kept going on! How many times did I think I couldn't handle one more problem? Thank God I depended on Him anyway and kept going on! It wasn't easy. At times, it was awfully hard! Thank God I found the courage to rely on Him anyway! For now I see what God was up to! Now I see how He was shaping and molding me. Even through some pretty tough times, shaping and molding me. Thank God I let Him do that instead of giving up or giving in! Thank God I kept going on!*

“Who are these, robed in white?” Yes, one day that crowd will include us. Amidst the challenges of life, it's easy to lose sight of that. But we won't let that happen, will we? All Saints Day is a good time to remind ourselves where this life is heading, and refocus on what ultimately matters, and let that inspire us all the more to value, practice, and cultivate the heroism of going on. Amen.