

The Race Set Before Us
Hebrews 11:29-30, 32-40, 12:1-2
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"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for" (Hebrews 1:1). This is how the Book of Hebrews starts. Faith and hope go together. For several weeks we've been talking about faith. Last week we looked at heroes of faith from the Hebrew Bible and faithful people in our day on whose shoulders we stand. We can think about our own individual faith in hard times and at turning points in our lives, or we can think about groups of people through history and how together people have held onto faith and have "run with perseverance the race that [was] set before [them]" (Hebrews 12:1).

So today I'd like to tell a couple of stories of people of faith.

Our daughter, Leslie, is now finishing up her volunteer year with the Mennonites in Kansas City. I read a history of the Mennonite people this summer. Most of us do not know many Mennonites, I'm guessing. On a United Methodist Volunteers in Mission work team in Biloxi, Mississippi, after the Katrina Hurricane, I found myself on a ladder applying dry wall in a home severely damaged by flooding, while two Mennonite women from Ohio were tiling the floor below me in long dresses and bonnets. The Mennonites and the Methodists were on some of the first response teams. But I have since learned, when we attended Leslie's Mennonite Church last fall, that most Mennonites do not dress in long skirts and bonnets any more. Their worship service is very much like ours—only with better hymn singing. The Mennonites are very similar to us in basic beliefs, but they are different in a certain orientation of choosing to see themselves as set-apart.

For generations Mennonites have refused to conform to the ways of society. In Europe in the 16th-19th centuries, the Mennonites were a people on the move in order to escape persecution. The Mennonites in Switzerland were called Anabaptists, a term used in the 16th century to mean nonconformists. They were the left wing of the Protestant Reformation. They refused to belong to the state church, they insisted upon adult baptism, they refused to swear an oath, and they sternly opposed all warfare. First by Catholics and then by other Protestants, the Swiss Brethren, as they were called, were burned at the stake and beheaded. The Brethren split and followed two leaders, Jakob Ammann—these became known as the Amish—and Menno Simons—these became known as the Mennonites. Groups lived in Switzerland, in Germany, in the Netherlands, in Poland, and in Russia. Their belief was that Christ was central in their lives, and that their faith should be practiced in daily living. (We could say the very same about our beliefs.) It's hard to understand how these committed Christians were persecuted in Europe until the mid 19th century just because they wouldn't baptize infants, they wouldn't swear an oath, and they wouldn't join the military. Like any people who suffer from others' prejudice, these people were hated simply because they were different.

Like the early Christians described in the Book of Hebrews, they "were tortured," they "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment" and death (11:35-37).

By their conscientious stand of pacifism, they "won strength out of weakness" (11:34). Then and today the Mennonites prefer a simple life style, one oriented to God. The Mennonites must have had faith that was "the assurance of things hoped for," for they were on the run. In 1643, Dutch Anabaptists settled in New Amsterdam, New York. And in 1710, a group of Swiss Mennonites emigrated from Europe to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. These became Mennonite communities in the United States, where these settlers had freedom of religion for the first time. They had "run with perseverance the race that was set before them."

As Christians we are united with the Mennonite Church—as we are with all Christians—as we strive to live out the Gospel and practice the sacraments of our faith in our context. Hearing the story of religious persecution, we might ask ourselves, "If we were persecuted for our faith, would we 'run with perseverance the race that is set before us'?"

In the United States it is easy to take our religious freedom for granted. Not so today in Fiji.

Fiji is located in the South Pacific, east of Australia and north of New Zealand. There are more than 300 islands in the Fijian Islands. In 1987 Fijian soldiers staged the first of 3 military coups. The present government of Fiji is a repressive government led by Commodore Bainimarama, who illegally took power in a coup d'état in December 2006, ousting a democratically elected government. This present military regime has targeted the Methodist Church in the country, apparently because its members and ministers have stood up against military rule and human rights abuses. In 2006, Fiji was suspended from the (British) Commonwealth of Nations because its dictator refused to hold democratic elections. The dictatorship tightened its grip on power this last April, imposing a state of emergency, overturning the constitution, firing the judiciary, and placing censors in newsrooms. New Zealand and Australian diplomats and media representatives have been thrown out of Fiji, sometimes with only a few hours notice.

The Methodist Church of Fiji has more than 200,000 members, representing about 1/3 of the country's population. The Methodist Church strongly opposes Bainimarama's regime (<http://anzacbloggersunite.blog.co.uk/2010/07/28/paranoic-fiji-military-regime-bans-methodist-church-conference-until-2014-and-blames-the-anzacs-for-fiji-s-problems-9055565/>).

This is a timely topic because, in August of each year, The Methodist Church of Fiji has held its annual conference. Preceding the conference is held each year a massive hymn singing competition with some 10,000 singers participating. But The Methodist Church has been forced by the government to cancel its annual Conference and choir festivals until the year 2014. I read that choir practice and hymn singing is probably the most widespread form of social activity, with the exception perhaps of kava drinking. National rugby teams have become famous for singing hymns of praise after their games.

(<http://fijitoday.wordpress.com/2009/07/31/an-outside-view-from-america/>). Singing the faith is a part of life in Fiji—we can certainly tell from our guest choir today, the Viti Singers, which means Fiji Singers.

All members of the Fijian Methodist Church Standing Committee have been charged with attending an unauthorized meeting last April, and have been held for questioning by the police. A number of the Church's ministers have also been accused of spying on the government, although the allegations have not been substantiated. One of the Church's superintendent ministers was detained after he was overheard saying that, even with the ban against attending church meetings, he would hold meetings whether or not they were legal, and his comments were reported to the military.

The Fijian Methodist Church has requested a meeting with the government to discuss the ban and explore alternatives. "We are a people who believe in knocking," said one minister, "Even until midnight!"

Under new legislation in Fiji, speaking out against the government is deemed to be treason. Sending criticisms of the regime to or from abroad will be regarded as sedition. Any such criticism (whether made in Fiji or abroad) is now being treated as a criminal act (<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/11283>).

But will the Fijian Methodists somehow keep meeting? Yes! Will the Fijian Methodists somehow keep singing? Yes! Fijian Methodists are continuing to gather for prayer and worship despite the persecution. And all around the world, wherever Fijians gather, they are singing!

There is a cost to discipleship. Sometimes our faith puts us to the test. Sometimes it puts us at great risk. But "faith is the assurance of things hoped for." If we lived today in the Fijian Islands, or if we had lived in the seventeenth century in Europe, or in the first century in the Mediterranean after Jesus' death and resurrection, we would know first-hand what it means to live by faith. Our religion is perhaps too easy today. It's too easy just to come to worship. Not much is asked of us—perhaps we should learn from our Christian brothers and sisters who have had to take risks, who have left their homes in order to find freedom, given up their homelands and made sacrifices. We can learn from our brothers and sisters in the faith that following Jesus has a cost.

Today we can at least acknowledge that we stand with Christians—a cloud of witnesses—who through the ages have suffered persecution for their faith. We stand with Methodists around the world—a cloud of witnesses—who even today suffer persecution for their faith. We stand with Fijian brothers and sisters united by our Wesleyan tradition and faith in the resurrected savior—to say that we believe in hope, even when it is not visible or evident. We believe that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

For we know that suffering leads to victory, as it did when Jesus suffered on the cross and three days later rose from the dead. We must look to Jesus! When we look to Jesus we find the courage "to run with perseverance the race that is set before us." May it be so for us.