

Called as a Witness

September 23, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

1 Timothy 2:1-6; Matthew 28:16-20 and Hebrews 1:1-3; 11 (selected verses); 12:1-2

From 8 to 10:30 this evening, I will watch the first two and a half hours of the PBS' presentation of historian and director Ken Burns' "The War." Reviewers claim this is Mr. Burns' best production to date. It recounts the years of World War II and is replete with images, film clips and memories of those who fought, whose buddies died and those of the "home front" who worked hard to keep the faith in trying times. We have much to learn from those Tom Brokaw called members of "The Greatest Generation" who are, in 2007, dying at the rate of more than one thousand each and every day and it is far more than about war's horror. Ken Burns says:

Instead of the shared sacrifices World War II demanded that created community and made us spiritually richer ... [today] we aren't asked to give up anything. We're narcissistic free agents. Surfing the Internet alone. Watching TV alone. Driving alone. There's too much *Pluribus* and not enough *Unum* [too little unity].

Ken Burns insists that "The War" is not a political statement; that the project commenced and most of the interviews were filmed long before the onset of the current Iraq War. Instead, in keeping with the force of his earlier creations, there is an implicit message that we can learn much from listening to witnesses from the past. Remembering the past, and in particular the lives of those we call witnesses if not heroes, is what we do today as we turn to The Letter to the Hebrews. As ever, words in Scripture are timeless and timely. When we read Holy Writ, we discern what was being said to whom back *then* and how those words are momentous for us today. The beauty of the Holy Bible is to be found in how words that were incredibly significant to persons who lived thousands of years ago speak volumes to us today.

There is reason to believe that The Letter to the Hebrews was a collaborative effort, including the words of at least one woman, Priscilla. These persons set out to accomplish the same goal as the Gospel of Matthew: to convince Jews that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. They did this by recounting how Old Testament stories serve as a precursor to the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ultimate reign of Jesus of Nazareth Who in glory we know to be the Christ. To set the stage, hear the first three verses of The Letter to the Hebrews:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom also He made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

In the 11th Chapter of Hebrews, the writers summarize the faithfulness of God's people, finding significance in the lives of witnesses who lived and died before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Hear now selected verses from that 11th Chapter as they lead to the first two words of the twelfth chapter that serve as our call to faithfulness and stewardship this day and in all our days to come:

11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for. 3 By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, ... 7 By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. ... 8 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 where he was going. 9 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. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered Him faithful Who had made the promise. ... 13 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, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ... 16 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. ... 20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. ... 23 By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw Him who is invisible. ... 29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; ... 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. ... 32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ... 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. 40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. ...

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

It is time to tie together these words from Hebrews, Jesus' commissioning of the disciples as we heard read from the end of Matthew's Gospel, Ken Burns' hope that we might learn again how to live in community and be spiritually richer, the words of our hymns and the choral anthem and Edward Sellner's words on the front of our worship bulletin:

We inherit from our ancestors gifts so often taken for granted... Each of us contains within... this inheritance of soul. We are links between the ages, containing past and present expectations, sacred memories and future promise.

Does all of this not speak to our commissioning as Christians? Does all of this not pull at our soul if not our senses, to remember the faithfulness of people in the near and distant past – and then to step forward in faith, and be witnesses, *faithful and committed witnesses*? It is true that stewardship is about providing for the mission and ministry of the church. Yes, that means realistic talk about budgets and costs. In snippets in the weeks and months to come, we will address those pragmatic and important concerns, for how we of Gates Presbyterian Church spend money in mission and ministry is an important part of who and what we are. All of this is theological, that is to say they are “God issues.” The word theology combines the Greek words Theo (God) and logos (words). That means that *any* words about God and God’s people are “theology.” And stewardship, be it of talent, time, energy or money is “God Talk!”

To bring us from the past to the more recent present, are we not grateful for the faithfulness of the peoples of Gates Presbyterian Church who brought us to this place and time, whose commitment to mission and ministry is a witness to their trust in a God Who stood by them in all of the circumstances of their lives? As we spend time in the next few months remembering and celebrating the work of the past that we might be reinvigorated for the work of the present and the laying of a foundation for the work of those in years to come, we will be inspired by the hope, faith, and love of persons of years in the past who move us, inspire us, and challenge us in the here and now. There is much to excite us! Mission work by our youth and adults here in the greater Rochester area, in Jamaica and in Guatemala speaks of our commitment to people beyond these walls. Our church choirs, fellowship groups of all ages, Bible studies – people are excited about being a part of these. When the Wednesday evening Bible class reassembled two Wednesday ago after the summer hiatus, the energy and excitement of dozen people getting back together reminded me of the unbridled vigor of cattle coming out of barns in the Spring after being cooped up all winter! The humor was a bit odd, but the energy was palatable!

There is the pragmatic side to all of this. This is the fourth building this congregation has enjoyed in one hundred and seventy-nine years. In that time, members faced building projects, facilities that needed repair or expansion or, as when the second building was destroyed by fire in 1906, complete replacement. As with our own homes: roofs, furnaces, floors need to be maintained and sometimes replaced. If you haven’t seen the completed renovations in the Senior High Lounge, you are in for a treat! Head down there after worship! I, too, groan when precious financial resources need to go for a new roof, new drywells or, as in this coming week, a new furnace for this Sanctuary as we would just as soon not breathe carbon monoxide. We recall how people of faith stepped up in years past – and we know people will, in faith do so again.

No matter the challenge, no matter the circumstances, do we not live by faith as did the people whose lives are recounted in Hebrews 11? Are we not, as in the words of our opening hymn and the anthem to follow this message, servants of God, servants of the LORD who are summoned to proclaim and live the faith – in the best and in the worst of times? Months ago, as I thought about this sermon, about how we would remember faithful witnesses of the past that we might be faithful witnesses today, of how we would hear Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples and know that we, too, are called upon, commissioned if you will, to be followers of the Christ, I thought of two wonderful and historical hymns of our faith. To my chagrin, I found neither in our hymnal.

I vividly recall my father's booming voice, slightly off key and embarrassingly loud enough to be heard from the farthest corner of any sanctuary we were in. One of his favorite hymns was John Bunyan's hymn. The original words were "He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster," and "his first avowed intent, to be a pilgrim" but today's version is close enough! Do those stanzas not encourage and inspire us? Do they not invoke memories of those who worked hard as pilgrims in the past, whose energy and faithfulness we need to emulate today?

We who would valiant be: let us not waver,
but in true constancy follow the Savior.
There's no discouragement shall make us once relent
our first avowed intent to live as pilgrims.

Those who may us surround with dismal stories,
only themselves confound; our strength the more is.
No foes shall give us fright, ours is the one true Light;
we will make good our right to live as pilgrims.

Since, Savior, You defend us with Your Spirit,
we know we at the end shall life inherit.
Cruel rumors, flee away, we'll fear not what they say;
we'll labor night and day to live as pilgrims.

My father also enjoyed our last hymn and I celebrate the life of a man who was a faithful spirit and pilgrim, who, despite his foibles and flaws, was one of two parents who taught me faith, taught me grace, and taught me love. I think of those of this congregation of whom so many of you speak who were just as faithful, who gave witness to the ways and truths of God, who served in mission and ministry with unflagging energy and undying devotion, without regard to the needs of self, who lived as Ken Burns wants us to remember to live: in community, for each other, inspiring each other, teaching each other. Like my father's singing, we will, on occasion, not get it quite right, but we will look to the Perfecter of our faith, the One to Whom people named in Hebrews 11 looked even though they lived years before Jesus Christ's coming. In that Perfection we call the Messiah, the Christ, we know that all things are possible with God. We know that the Almighty stands by us in every gain and every loss, during every joy and every sorrow. We know any endeavor we pursue in Christ's name will be blessed, the resources we need to do the work of God will be found. We will rediscover how to move from complacency to purposefulness. We hear the commissioning of our LORD and know that means inviting others to join us in a ministry about which we are excited! We will rediscover ways of generosity and sharing. In the voices of past witnesses, we hear God's call to be disciples, pilgrims, faithful spirits, followers of the Christ. The words of our final hymn beckon us, challenge us, call us ... to live and be witnesses of Christ, persons of faith, the people of God:

Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,
move the faithful spirits at the call divine.
Gifts in differing measure, hearts of one accord,
manifold the service, one the sure reward;
Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,
move the faithful spirits at the call divine.

Amen.