

The Christian journey is not always easy. Well, maybe that is an understatement. If we are honest, the Christian journey is not easy at all. Not if we are heeding Jesus' call to do as he commands; to love as he loves, to follow his example, to put our trust and faith in God. We heard last week that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. Hope for what we imagine, faith in what we cannot know. We strive to be faithful people, so that in the times when our lives are overcome with difficulties and we find ourselves worried, or afraid, we may find our strength and guidance in God. But sometimes, life demands more of us than we could possibly imagine or think we can handle, and we may find ourselves in situations for which we have no frame of reference or experience, uncertain of how to respond or where to turn.

In our lesson from Isaiah, God articulates frustration and disappointment. God has come and built a vineyard, Jerusalem, the place where God's beloved community will live and flourish. As the vine grower, God has great expectations for Israel and the fruit it will bear as a righteous and just nation, yet Israel has turned its back on God and God's ways. We can imagine God's frustration, for we all know what it feels like when those we love reject our offering, or turn away from us. We also can imagine God's heartbreak and disappointment when Israel fails to heed God's warning, instead trusting only in itself, earthly rulers and false gods. We can liken God to parents who so often must stand by and watch as their children stray, determined and unyielding, failing to heed their counsel,—hoping that no harm comes to them as they wait with open arms for their return.

We know, too, how it feels when the guidance, warnings and help we offer fall on deaf ears. It may comfort us to know that God understands first-hand the struggles and challenges we experience in our everyday lives. And when our faith is challenged, if we find ourselves frustrated or afraid, we can turn to Hebrews where we find words of wisdom and encouragement that can help us.

The Hebrews have experienced difficulty, persecution, and aggression. They have been threatened and rejected, are afraid and feel isolated. It is into this moment that the author speaks of “the great cloud of witnesses”, Abraham, Moses, Noah and many other exemplar and faithful folks in Israel's history who in times of supreme challenge, persevered and endured as they demonstrated a faith that trusts in what it cannot see, and which relies upon hope in God for survival. One of those saints, Rahab, is remembered for her generous hospitality.

According to the book of Joshua, Rahab was a Canaanite woman living in Jericho who assisted the Israelites in capturing the city by hiding two of Joshua's spies sent to scout the city from their enemies, under bundles of flax. Having saved their lives, Rahab asked that her life and the lives of her family be spared, and that the spies offer a token of proof. The spies gave her a red rope to hang out her window and promised the family would be spared. They were, and after the massacre, Rahab and her family were incorporated among the Jewish people.

Because of her allegiance to God and Israel, Rahab is remembered as one of Israel's earliest saviors. Although some name her as a prostitute, and others as an innkeeper, she is lauded as a model of hospitality, mercy, patience and repentance, is an inspiring example of a saint who lived by faith.

The author also points our attention to Jesus, the high priest of God who is always with us. He encourages each of us to persevere as we run the race God has placed before us. If we look to Jesus, we see that he ran his race and lived out his destiny, fully knowing what was to come. We are different than Jesus in that most of the adversity and difficulties that we face come about unbeknownst to us. We are caught by

surprise, and we do not know what lies ahead. And we can feel overwhelmed when we are blanketed by the heaviness of difficulty and tragedy. It is in such times that we may call upon our personal saints – the cloud of witnesses that surround us and that by their lived example and perseverance, give us hope and encouragement to carry on.

Imagine in your deepest sadness or a time of great fear that, like a cloud, you become surrounded by your saints, people whose wisdom guides you, whose example encourages you, and whose faith inspires you. Who are the saints that have gone ahead of you, that you look to for help. For some of us, it's a parent or grandparent; a teacher, coach or friend. Maybe your saint is a person from the Bible, or an activist or religious leader. Simply, a saint can be any person you remember that by their living and example help you to have courage and strength. A saint also can be living, present and walking alongside you, right now, in your life today.

My friend told me of her friend Shelly who had fought cancer for many years and who, late last year, came to the time and place where there was no more fighting to do. So, acutely aware of and grateful for the love, care and support she had been given by so many family and friends she called “her saints on earth”, Shelly reached out to them before her death and invited each to come to spend some time and to say their goodbyes. As each came, after thanking them for being her saints on earth, Shelly invited them also to peruse her books and things, and if they wished, to take something of hers with them: a keepsake or to keep her memory present for them. She then reminded them that she would soon join the great communion of saints, and that they could always call upon her as one of theirs. My friend shared that it was one of the most beautiful and meaningful experiences of her life, a reminder of the power of community, especially in the most difficult of times.

When life tosses us lemons, it is good to have a saint to call upon to help us figure out how to make lemonade. When times get tough, we need one another. We need to be reminded that we are not alone – that God is always with us, and that we can always tap into our saints, in heaven or on earth. Their examples of courage, perseverance and strength can keep us grounded in our faith and remind us that we aren't called to do this life alone – but inside of community.

And speaking of community, each Wednesday morning here at St. Dunstan's, we gather for holy communion, and to remember a saint of the church. After hearing their story, we then take time as a group for reflection and conversation about where and how God was working in their life, how they overcome adversity or expressed their faith, and how their life and example might aid us in our lives today. Most often these saints were ordinary men and women of their time, like you and me, who facing a significant challenge, an extraordinary situation, or a profound opportunity, called upon their faith in God to guide and sustain them.

We are a community of human beings who find their commonality in their belief in God, who in times of challenge and heartbreak, circle the camps with love, protection and grace, and who in times of celebration, gather together to share our joy. In community we find the strength and encouragement to persevere; In community we express our love and compassion for one another, even when there is nothing tangible we can do to change or fix a situation. In community we offer presence, prayer, and protection, for when one of our community suffers, we know that in some way, we all do. And so, our collective call to community is the invitation to show up and to persevere one moment at a time, running as best we can the race we have been given to run.

No matter how tumultuous or frightening our context, we are reminded that others have faced no less challenging circumstances and remained steadfast in following the God who remained faithful to the covenant made with Abraham, and thus through Abraham to us. God never stops calling and equipping

ordinary people for extraordinary circumstances. Our time may seem uniquely difficult and our challenges especially harrowing – but Hebrews reminds us otherwise. Hebrews looks through a large lens and prompts us to remember the long arc of salvation history, and that we too have a place in the narrative. We are the continuation of the story of the saints.

Jesus knows our burdens, knows our sorrows, and knows what it is to carry them. With the heaviest of loads, he carried that cross straight into his death – because he loves us, and because he knew what lay beyond. That is why he is so emphatic when he calls us out – he doesn't want us to lose sight of what lies beyond, and he wants us to remember always that he is with us, and that when our burdens seem to great to bear, we can rely upon him, trust in him, and surrender them to him. And, always, just as he did, we may call upon the wisdom and counsel, words and example of our great cloud of witness – those before and those with us today – to make our way through. Jesus is our strength. He is our hope. And we are not alone.