



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Pentecost 10 – Proper 15 (C)

By Faith

[RCL] Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

A great many people would agree that, nowadays, the world looks sad and in decline. Precious few news stories situate members of the human race in a positive light. Circumstances look bad in many places. People of diverse and even conflicting perspectives share at least this one viewpoint: Now is a troubled time.

The list of seemingly insurmountable problems is a long one. I have my version of it, but will not recite it now as it's likely that each of us has our own, and that these are overlapping lists. Adam Russell Taylor, president of the social justice ministry Sojourners, uses a term that may be appropriate for the situation: We belong to the “Exhausted Majority.”

So, what are we to do?

Today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews offers us timely hope. It is one of the Bible's most stirring passages, a scriptural equivalent of *The 1812 Overture*. The author cites one memorable hero or group of heroes after another. Whether or not they are known to us, we get the picture; these are people who did the right thing under the most difficult circumstances. Their stories are, to borrow a phrase, profiles in courage. So far, so good.

But the author of Hebrews insists on something further. Those whom this author mentions, whether by name or otherwise, did what they did, endured what they endured, by faith. Whether explicit or implicit, this is the refrain that keeps ringing out, ringing out for our edification and encouragement. By faith they acted, by faith they endured. These are people who, during the most trying of times, put their trust in God and kept it there.

There is also something else that the author of Hebrews asserts, something even more outrageous, more daring. Those under the Old Covenant who suffered so much and achieved so much have yet to receive all that was promised them. Why? They will not receive their great reward, they will not achieve their perfection, apart from doing so with us. In similar fashion, we will not receive what God intends for us in

isolation from them. They, the people of the Old Covenant, and we, the people of the New Covenant, cannot find ultimate fulfillment apart from each other.

Sisters and brothers, did you hear that? We come as late arrivals to the dance floor, to the banquet table, but not to worry: the party will not start without us, so eagerly is our presence desired!

Those faithful ones of the Old Testament wait for us. What then are we to do? The Letter to the Hebrews spells out our obligation. We are to run with perseverance and patience the race set before us. No one can do this in our place. We must look ahead to Jesus, keep our eyes fixed on him, and take inspiration from his example. Jesus endured the agony and shame that came from his execution and now he sits in the place of honor beside God the Father.

Moreover, all those faithful ones cited and celebrated in today's passage are not mere historical figures; they are alive even now. As we run our race, the race of this life, they surround us as spectators in a vast stadium, cheering us on, cheering us on because they know well the challenge of the race they once ran and now is ours to complete. When we pray to God for strength to persist, they pray with us, they cheer for us.

We must always remember that this great cloud of witnesses supports us even now. By faith, they achieved and endured when the race was theirs. Now they pray that we may achieve and endure in this moment. As our planet is wrapped in an atmosphere that allows us to live and thrive, so also the earth is wrapped in the prayers of the countless saints directing us in the ways of righteousness and peace.

Yes, we may be exhausted people. We may feel alone in our struggle, assuming that no one cares. When that happens, we must look up and see again that a vast crowd of witnesses surrounds us. They are cheering for us, cheering us on, so that we can surpass exhaustion, even as they did.

They are far more in number than those cited in today's reading, for their number has grown. They include people of many places and centuries, and even people known personally to us. Look carefully and you will see familiar faces. They are cheering for you.

And you will see among that vast assembly some very beautiful faces not of this earth, who are nonetheless there to support us. I speak of the holy angels. These creatures of God look in awe and wonder at all the good things humans are meant to do on earth. They behold our struggles, and they pray for us to their Creator and our own.

We Christians believe in the holy angels as do Jews and Muslims, but sometimes we forget that these angels are always close by, obeying God by supporting us. Do not assume that their concern for humanity is limited to a small number of episodes recounted in holy writings. The blessed angels need never rest. They are always on missions from God, assisting us in all sorts of ways, most of them unknown to us. Some of them are specialists, with each of us assigned a guardian angel.

In this regard, we can recall an Old Testament story about the prophet Elisha: The king of Aram wanted to capture Elisha, who was in the city of Dothan, so he sent there by night horses and chariots, a great army. An attendant of Elisha rose early the next morning and found that the city was surrounded. The attendant cried out to Elisha, “Alas, Master! What shall we do?” Elisha answered, “Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.” Then Elisha prayed, “O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.” So, the Lord opened the attendant’s eyes, and he saw; the mountains were full of horses and chariots of fire, heavenly spirits in the service of God.

Whenever our struggle is to obey God’s will, to support some just cause, may we shake off our fear, remembering that there are more with us than with our opponents, though our heavenly supporters may be invisible to our eyes.

Recalling this support God gives us through saints and angels is part of what it means to live by faith.

We may belong to the Exhausted Majority. If that’s true, then there’s no shame in admitting it. But we must not stop there. Through faith, we can access the power of God. The saints and angels help us access that power so that our broken, bewildered world can be saved—yet again.

God, his angels, and his saints are not exhausted. We may be exhausted, but we need not, we mustn’t remain that way. Too much is at stake. The race is now ours to run with patience and perseverance.

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