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Title: Keep the Faith!

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Scripture: [Hebrews 11:1-12](#)

Text: [Hebrews 11:29-12:2](#)

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First, a question. What do these people have in common? Robert Irsay, Bill Brooks, Ted Marchibroda, Chris Hinton, Jim Harbaugh, Tony Dungy, Marvin Harrison, Edgerrin James, Eric Dickerson, Marshall Faulk, Jeff Saturday, Bill Polian, Peyton Manning, Reggie Wayne, Dwight Freeny and all Colts fans have in common? If you said that they are all a part of the Indianapolis Colts Ring of Honor, you would be correct. The Ring of Honor is an actual ring around the inside of the stadium with these names. It was started with one name in 1996 in the RCA Dome, has been added to over the years, and moved with the team to Lucas Oil Stadium.¹ Even if you are not a football fan or Colts fan, you likely know most of those names. Without these names, the Indianapolis Colts would be a lesser organization.

Another question. What do Debra Rusk, IMPD K-9 Officer Perry, and Pershing McAlister have in common? If you said that they are three of the many honorees of the Indiana State Fair this year, you would be correct. The Fair this year has the theme of "Heroes in the Heartland." While Rusk, McAlister and dog Perry, named after IMPD officer Perry Renn who was killed in the line of duty in 2015, may not be household names like the Colts Ring of Honor, they are just as important in their respective fields. Rusk teaches at IU School of Medicine after a lung disease almost took her life when she was young. K-9 Perry and his handler search for explosives around the city of Indianapolis before events large and small. McAlister, from Indianapolis, was in the first wave on D-Day in 1941 in North Africa.² Without these names, Indianapolis and the world would be a lesser place.

The Indiana State Fair chose this year to pay tribute to the heroism of everyday people whose exceptional commitment and caring enrich our lives without the benefit of capes, costumes or superpowers. The State Fair has essentially created a Hoosier Ring of Honor at this year's Fair.

Hebrews 11 is a Ring of Honor of faith. The author of Hebrews selects a cross-section of faith heroes to highlight as examples of faith because things were getting tough and they needed encouragement. They are figures from Israel's history that, even though some are obscure to us, would have been household names to this Jewish community to which the author is writing. The author ends the recitation of heroes and heroines of the faith by calling

them “the great cloud of witnesses.” Let’s do a quick recap of this Hebrews ring of honor from chapter 11.

Abel is the second son of Adam and Eve so this list is starting at the beginning. He was the first shepherd and the first martyr.

Enoch so pleased God that he was spared from death.

Noah was obedient to God and started building an ark long before it started to rain likely to the misunderstanding of the people around him.

Abraham is a big deal in the list from Hebrews. He gets a lot of ink from verse 8 through verse 19. Considered the father of the Jewish nation, Abraham was ready to sacrifice even a son, if that was God’s will.

Sarah, Abraham’s wife, is one of our heroines. Long past child-bearing age, she has a baby. Her faith is an inspiration to every person who has ever waited on God to act.

In those intervening verses that we didn’t read this morning, there are more names in the ring of honor. There is Isaac, the father of Esau and Jacob. There is Jacob, one of the great patriarchs who fathered 12 sons who became the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel. There is Joseph, whose brothers had done him wrong but to whom he offered forgiveness.

Like Abraham, Moses rightly gets a lot of press in Hebrews 11 as well. He is a leader against all odds and against a fair amount of push back from the people he was trying to lead.

Joshua led the people of Israel in their conquest of the Promised Land and even was faithful with God gave an illogical command to march for seven days around Jericho’s perimeter walls.

Rahab became a spy for God and was key in Jericho’s defeat. Gideon was a reluctant but obedient warrior. Samson and Jephthah were warriors and judges. There’s David, the shepherd-boy king who is a slayer of giants and Samuel, the last of the prophets who had unwavering faith in God.

You heard me also read some descriptions of people without names attached to them. We don’t know for sure but we can make some guesses. The one who “shut the mouths of lions” is likely Daniel. “Quenched raging fire” sounds like the three in the furnace – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. “Weakness was turned to strength,” may be Hezekiah who recovered from

sickness. "Women receive their loved ones back from death" actually happens a couple of times in First and Second Kings – maybe Zarephath.

The last two that have no exact identities are the "some that died by stoning," – perhaps Zechariah who was stoned to death and another actually "sawn in two," thought in Jewish tradition to be Isaiah. It's quite a list.³

Some things immediately get my attention from this list. The most striking is that each of these heroes and sheroes were flawed to varying degrees – some a little but most, a lot! Their back story is filled with failures and warts. These people, before their encounter with God, are not really a Ring on Honor but look more like a rogues' gallery of sinners and criminals.

Moses killed a man. Rahab was a prostitute. Samson fell into Delilah's trap. Samuel chose Saul, then deserted Saul. David was an adulterer and a murderer. Gideon and Barak wavered before going into battle. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter to honor his own words instead of God's. The flaws are longer than the list of names for each had multiple warts.

Another thing that the author points out is that their faith prevailed despite the fact they lived and died before they could receive what was promised, that is, before the saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They were tortured, sawn in two, and imprisoned. Others were relegated to an outcast life.

At the beginning of chapter 12, there is the word "THEREFORE." The word "therefore" always means "now I am going to sum up for you the case that I was making in everything I've said before – it's why formal resolutions and proclamations have as their summation – "Therefore Be It Resolved." In Hebrew 12, the summation is, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside that which weighs us down and run with perseverance the race before us as we keep our eye on Jesus Christ to lead us in this life."

They are a cloud of witnesses. We like to think of the cloud as a pure white but that word cloud can also mean something that darkens and obscures. A cloud on someone's reputation isn't a good thing. This cloud of witnesses in Hebrews isn't a clear, shining beacon of unadulterated goodness. This cloud of witnesses is a condensation of troubled, sometimes tortured, sometimes triumphant lives of ordinary men and women made extraordinary by an unclouded faith in an unclouded God.

Here's a news flash – people of faith are not perfect. People of faith don't have all the answers. People of faith are not folks that can give the perfect

theological answer to every question. We, as Christians with faith in Jesus Christ, are those who have learned that God can be trusted and we keep the faith. God can be trusted to give peace in the midst of the storm. God can be trusted to take what is evil and transform it into something good. God can be trusted to empower you in the midst of trouble. God can be trusted to receive you when you die. God can be trusted!

There are examples all around you even today of people who make up a ring of honor of faith in this place. I have a perch where I witness it each and every day. There are grandparents raising grandkids, a radical departure from their retirement dreams and they keep the faith. There are people who struggle with mental illness that on some days is debilitating and they keep the faith. There are people who get up each day with the pain of a chronic illness that weighs heavily and never lets go and they keep the faith. There are those who have lost a loved one too early or too fast or too tragically and they keep the faith. There are those who go to work only to be told there is no more work for you here and they keep the faith.

There are those who work in danger serving this community and this country and they keep the faith. There are those whose child has gone silent in their contact with parents who nurtured him and yet they keep the faith. And in this time of a building fund campaign, there are those who sacrificially give generously to this church even though their resources are scarce and asked for elsewhere. All these and more, just people I know personally that are members of this congregation who attend this campus. Each one of you has a faith story.

But faith, if we are to believe the list the author of Hebrews made for us, is more than an internal trait. We would have not known the faith of any of those in the long list were it not for their faith that translated into action.

There's an old story of Homer and Emmy Lou who were courting on the front porch swing. Homer was very much in love with Emmy Lou, but he was also very shy. He started working up his courage to express his real feelings to her by saying, "You know, Emmy Lou, if I had a thousand eyes they would all be focused on you. If I had a thousand arms they would all be hugging you. If I had a thousand lips they would all be kissing you." Emmy Lou, who was sort of put out by all this rumbling, looked at Homer and said, "Homer, why don't you stop complaining about what you don't have and use what you do have?"⁴ Faith is the action we take. Faith is the move we make. Faith is the ability to see it, but it is also the courage to act upon it. If we are keepers of the faith we also must be sharers of the faith.

I invite you this week to see if you might live a "keep the faith" life. Living a "keep the faith" life opens doors to amazing possibilities. A "keep the faith" life gives you a positive attitude rather than negative. A "keep the faith" life makes you receptiveness instead of defensiveness. A "keep the faith" life addresses challenges and real hardships with the mind and spirit set "why not" instead of bemoaning "why me?" The people given as examples of "faithfulness" in today's scripture are all over the map. Those specifically named experienced true triumphs and affirmations because of their faith. But they also fell flat with their failures. Keeping the faith is not a perfectly lived life. But it is a life that knows how to re-set itself when things go off track. Faithfulness is not a state of being but a state of becoming. Faithfulness is an ever on-going process of reset and reboot.

It takes constant maintenance to keep the faith. A prayer life, serving, study, a faithful worship cadence. A Church goer wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. "I've gone for 30 years now," he wrote, "and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So, I think I'm wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all."

This started a controversy in the "Letters to the Editor" column, much to the delight of the editor. It went on until someone wrote this clincher: "I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this. They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead!"⁵

Next month, I'll be traveling back to Kansas where I've been asked to preach at the 150th-anniversary service in my home congregation so I've been thinking a bit about my cloud of witnesses. The lyrics to the 1988 Steve Green song has been rumbling around in my head.

We're pilgrims on the journey
Of the narrow road
And those who've gone before us line the way
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary
Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful
May the fire of our devotion light their way
May the footprints that we leave

Lead them to believe
And the lives we live inspire them to obey

Oh, may all who come behind us find us faithful.⁶

On this day, I give thanks for that cloud of witnesses in my life. For the list from Hebrews who we share as ancestors in the faith. For my own ancestors biological and spiritual who kept the faith that was handed to me. To you, you in this room who are a part of that cloud of witnesses for me. Flawed and warts – absolutely – I wouldn't love you any other way.

Know this, you who are a part of my cloud of witnesses. There will be times when you feel that you are down to nothing but know that God is up to something. Faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible and encourages the impossible! KEEP THE FAITH.

¹ Indianapolis Colts Ring of Honor information from Wikipedia entry on the subject

² From Indiana State Fair website – www.indianastatefair.com – “Heroes in the Heartland” tab

³ Fairchild, Mary. "Heroes of Faith in the Book of Hebrews." Learn Religions, Jul. 11, 2019, learnreligions.com/hebrews-chapter-11-heroes-of-faith-700176

⁴ Homer and Emily Lou story found in sermon, “Footsteps of the Faithful” by J. Howard Olds at www.sermons.com

⁵ Letters to the editor story found at blog post titled “Why Go to Church” dated May 7, 2013 and found at www.morningstoryanddilbert.wordpress.com.

⁶ “Find Us Faithful,” by Steve Green written in 1988 found at www.genius.com.