

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Hebrews 12:1-2**  
*It's Time...for Heritage and Witness*  
**November 25, 2007**  
**It's Time...A Journey Towards Missional Faithfulness**

**Hebrews 12:1-2**

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, [2] looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

There are few things to compare with the holidays, when it comes to reminding one of family. Last Friday, we gathered with my family, and were literally surrounded by siblings, nieces and nephews, neighbors, and friends. There were some, I did not even know who they were! We were also reminded of those who were no longer there, but whose presence we still felt. There is just something about these kinds of gatherings, where we are gently reminded of those who have gone before us. It is both sentimental and strengthening.

I suspect, that more than one of us is attracted to this text from Hebrews, for much the same reason. The language of memory and presence is powerful. This great cloud of witnesses...it is a fascinating thought, is it not. The author of Hebrews, beginning in chapter 11, looks back to the days of Abel and recounts all those who have gone before: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham. The author recounts great names from our Old Testament and holds them up as examples of faith, because they believed in something they did not see, and were content enough to know that they may not get to the promise in their lifetime. Their legacy of faith is our heritage as God's people.

Heritage is an interesting word. For some, "heritage" connotes images of a romanced past, idyllic and bucolic. We apply the word towards family, nation, and church. "It is about heritage," we say, and thump our chest with a note of pride.

Of course, heritage has a less attractive side. Anyone doing family research has discovered shadows in one's family. Shortly after my children were born I got interested in doing family research. I wanted to know more about my heritage. I discovered, for example, that my family never owned slaves, and so, I felt pretty good about that part of our history. Then I found out that I had an uncle who left the row crops of Putnam County, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and meandered down south to Florida, where it was rumored that there were jobs. Evidently, he took his time because he would settle in some South Georgia town, meet a gal, get married and start a family. Then he would head further south and settle in another South Georgia town, meet another gal, get married and start another family. Apparently, this pattern repeated itself a number of times. When people ask me if I am kin to some DeLoach in South Georgia, I usually look down and give a non-committal mumble.

Heritage is tricky. Baptists share in the ambivalence of what is meant by heritage. We were birthed as a dissenting people, refusing to worship along the dictates of first, the Church of England, and during colonial America, the state church of Georgia. We like that part of our history. Yet Baptists have an unappealing side to our heritage. In the 1840's, we decided that it was okay to own slaves. Thankfully, twenty years later, our country took a legislative stand.

The same could be said about the heritage of this church. We came into being, because eighteen people began praying in 1817. Yet, nearly forty years later, this church found itself in turmoil and the trouble was coming from the "Music Department." Apparently, it got so bad, that the church in conference resolved to "dispense with the use of the organ and with the services of a choir for twelve months." (*The History of the*

*First Baptist Church*, Anna Olive Jones, p. 35.) Just a few years later, the pastor resigned, beneath a murky cloud and the church followed up with resolutions admonishing him for drinking. Anna writes in her history of the church, that First Baptist was at a low point: problems of finance, without a pastor, and division within the church and community over the impending Civil War. This church has seen in its nearly 200 years of existence, phenomenal growth and outreach. Missions were started worldwide including the Chinese Sunday School class, which is still thriving today. Yet, our heritage has included divisions and splits. In 1936, they fired the pastor, Dr. Fred Smith, which did not help problems whatsoever.

We look back at parts of our heritage and beam, chuckle, and sometimes shake our head and ask, “How on earth, amidst such diversity, such differences, did we ever get here?” We do the same thing, by the way, whenever we gather with our families during the holidays or reunions – *how on earth did I get here?!*

Do you think that is part of the point the author of Hebrews was trying to make? “Look back,” he (or she) says, “and see these characters from our past.”

What is it that kept it all together?

- A Call to Pilgrimage.

Each in his or her own way understood life as a journey. They were neither the beginning nor the end, but part of the pilgrimage. “...*they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*” (11:13)

The truth is, God is *not* asking us to solve all the world’s problems. Only God can do that. God is calling us, however, to be faithful in our part of the journey.

- This passage of Hebrews, is also a Call to Endure.  
*...let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,** (NAS; perseverance NRS)*

We are running a course set before us. We still must choose the course, and make the run, and do so with focus. It is what it is. The course we are on is the course we must run. It may change. In fact, it probably *will* change at some point, maybe for the better or maybe with more challenge. What the Bible asks of us is to be faithful, disciplined and focused.

- Finally, it is a Call to Carry On.

The author of Hebrews wrote, “*let us also lay aside every weight.*” Other translations read encumbrance or hindrance. In the Greek, world athletes ran their races stark naked. The robes that were customary were not appropriate to compete in, for they would get entangled in their legs as they tried to run.

A word of caution: our past can both strengthen and weaken our pilgrimage. Sometimes our past encumbers us. We get paralyzed by our failures and mistakes and sometimes, just as easily, by our successes and victories.

“*Run the race that is set before us...*” The biblical image here is one of a cheering throng, a grand gathering of those we know, and those we would like to know.

For several years, on Thanksgiving morning, I would join several thousand other runners for the Atlanta Half-Marathon. The race began somewhere along the north side of I-285 and took us through the heart of the city and finished outside of Turner Stadium, where the Braves play their home games. On that same day, the homeless are fed, also, at Turner Stadium. During a road race, it is not uncommon to have family and friends

posted along the way to cheer you along, wave signs, or hand out water or a sports drink. This race was no different, and all along those 13 miles were people cheering, encouraging, playing music, and enjoying our agony. When you got into the heart of the city, on Peachtree Street, surrounded by skyscrapers, everyone is fatigued and an eerie quiet has settled in. One year, I shall never forget this, along this same route where the spectators have thinned out, and the mood has moved from euphoria to endurance, a group of men were making their way to get fed for the Hosea Williams, Feed the Hungry. Judging by their appearance, they probably had no dining room tables waiting for them, and no family or friends, in which they could toast the holiday or watch the football games. Just homeless men, taking a chilly walk to be fed. Yet, they were clapping. They were clapping and cheering, and sincerely encouraging us along. It was the best feeling I have ever had in a road race.

Just imagine, these named here in scripture, surrounding you today saying, you can make it, be strong, carry on. Think of those who believed against all odds, that a small group of followers of Jesus could actually make a difference here in Augusta. When the finances were failing, and the resolve of church leaders was melting, when war was pillaging the community, a people of our past journeyed on and persevered. Now just imagine those special people in your life, who are no longer here with you. Those ones who helped make a real difference in who you are today. Remember their friendship, their leadership, their mentoring in your life. They are part of that cloud of witnesses too, who have gathered around you.

I would like for you to write on a piece of paper these words: I will run the race that is set before me... Underneath those words, I would like for you to consider what race you believe would be the kind of journey that would challenge your life, like never before, the kind of race that would have you pressing forward and not running aimlessly. The kind of race that would have you running, as Paul puts it, *as if you mean to win*. You know something else? We may not be the fastest or the best. We most certainly will lose our way on occasion, but none of that has to matter.

NRS Isaiah 40:3: *but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

You and I and this church, and our lives must keep on moving. The race is not over and God has not changed courses on us. *The Divine Now is NOW.*

***Run the race set before you.***