

Pentecost 10

August 14, 2022

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Pastor Ann Hultquist

Flat Stanley. If you are a parent, grandparent, elementary student or you know kids that age, you might be very familiar with Stanley Lambchop, aka Flat Stanley. In a children's book, the poor guy is squashed flat by a falling bulletin board. He discovers that he can enter locked rooms by sliding under the door; he can roll himself up to roll over to the park; is even made into a kite to be flown by his brother; and he can visit his friends in California by mailing himself in an envelope!

Elementary school teachers transformed Flat Stanley from a book into a great project, which some of you may have been a part of over the years. Stanley becomes a paper cutout for the classroom--often laminated, the better to adventure by--students take him home and often send him off in the mail to family/friends. Pictures are taken, and Stanley has a diary to show where he's been and what he's been doing, which can include vacations, hanging out at home, and some precarious situations like "bungee jumping" in the backyard. For a flat guy, he gets around!

"What more should I say?" says the writer of Hebrews this morning. "For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David, Samuel and the prophets."

It's been quite a litany in our readings from Hebrews this Sunday and last Sunday. Trying to encourage faithful followers of Jesus, the writer lists so many who have come before us: Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and his mother, and the faithful folks mentioned today.

But unless you are a committed student of the Bible, all these names can be just that to you--just names, entire stories of people collapsed into sound bites--*flat figures* who probably had their own adventures, but we think have nothing to do

with us. That would be a mistake--we would miss the rich tapestry of people that God loves and has called to faith.

Noah--we probably all know about the boat, the ark, and the rainbow. Sarah--the one who laughed when God said Medicare would be paying for her labor and delivery. Moses--walking through the parted Red Sea: we know about them. But what about Rahab, mentioned today and also in Jesus' genealogy in the Gospel of Matthew. "A prostitute?!" you might say. Yes, actually, and someone who used her opportunity for "pillow talk" with soldiers to help Joshua bring the walls of Jericho tumbling down.

Or Barak, a reluctant guide for God's people, who along with the prophet Deborah, made peace possible in Israel for forty years. Or David--shepherd boy, slinger of stone, who as king danced before God in well, basically a Speedo. Or Samuel, who first heard God's voice speaking when he was just a little boy..

Can you imagine them? Can you hear how these folks, and so many others, are not pious, flat figures, but complicated, beautiful, messy, loving, faithful, conniving, forgiven people. Kind of like you...like all of us.

What do you see when you look in the mirror? Our default setting, so to speak, is often to look at ourselves and our lives and think one of two ways: Either "I'm not that great of a person; what can I possibly be and do?" **or** we say "I have really made something of myself. If only more people were like me."

Both ways of thinking are flawed, because they leave God out of the picture, don't they?---"What could God do with me?" on the one hand; and "I don't need God's presence" on the other. Our deluge of social media spends a whole lot of time pushing us toward one or the other--comparisons that make us think we are worth nothing; or encouragement to think we just might be the center of the universe.

Our baptismal theology can help us think through this false dichotomy, helping us plant our feet squarely in a different place: "I am a child of God," we can say, "washed in the water and marked with the cross of Christ forever." We are loved and forgiven, claimed by the one that Hebrews says has gone before us and is

always going before us: “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

Jesus enters into all of our human life, bringing gifts that come through the cross and empty tomb: grace and forgiveness that accepts us and also changes us; and love that cherishes us in all our ordinary moments and in our times of difficulty and joy. In that too, we are so much like the litany of people from this week and last, aren't we?

What can God do with complicated, beautiful you? What will you *let* God do with messy, forgiven you?

We *are* surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who are our companions on this journey of life, both those who live with us now and those who now live with Christ. Faithful people who are anything *but* flat!

So, we might say “Time would fail me to tell of Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Rahab, David and _____.” (Insert your name there)