

Running with Our Faith Ancestors

Jer 23: 23-29, Heb 11: 29-12:2

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Brayden T Baptism

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Jer 23: 23-29

Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD. I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Heb 11: 29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. 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, 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.

Primo Serra was a young hardworking Catholic man in San Giovanni de Persiceto, in the Bologna province of Italy in early 1913. With political upheaval across the kingdoms that were struggling to become the new nation of Italy, the burgeoning roots of fascism, the anticlerical movement, and the challenges of finding a good job to support his family, Primo made the

decision to leave Italy for America, to find better opportunities for work, safety and to practice his religious beliefs. Through contacts with others from his village who had already emigrated, and money scraped together from nearby relatives, the Serra family sailed in the cramped quarters of a cargo ship from Genoa, Italy to Boston. The Serra family- Primo, his pregnant wife Prima, and 2 year old son Giorgio, left behind both the dangers and the comforts of San Giovanni for the hope of a safer home, prosperity and the freedom to worship as they believed.

After nearly 2 weeks aboard the ship, they stepped foot on the soil of their new country, and then traveled nearly 100 miles west to the South End of Springfield, MA, a growing Italian neighborhood. Here, Primo and Prima, as the other immigrants did, gradually became a part of the American melting pot.

Their neighborhood was home, and it was Italian in language, culture and food, but beyond the neighborhood, they immersed themselves in becoming American. Young Giorgio became 'George' beyond the South End. Their daughter was born in August, and she was named Frances, not Francesca.

With his craftsman skills, Primo found work at the Springfield Armory, where he quickly stepped into an important part of the early history of his new country. The armory, founded by George Washington in 1777, had manufactured cartridges and gun carriages for the Revolutionary war effort. Now Primo was one of many other immigrant laborers building rifles that were later used as the United States entered the Great War.

Primo and Prima were my great-grandparents, Giorgio was my grandfather. Though they are long gone, their life stories remain an important part of our family. There is a profound legacy and inspiration that they have left to all of us.

The importance of faith, family, a strong work ethic, perseverance to create a new life in a new hometown, the ability to confront crisis rather than hide from it, and the value of becoming a part of the community and its history, were not abstract ideas but lived experiences that were passed down as an intangible yet priceless part of our inheritance.

Primo and Prima Serra are a part of the great cloud of witnesses, not only in our family, but in the long story of faithful people who persevered through crisis, challenge and change.

The "great cloud of witnesses" that surrounds us are people from every time and place whose lives were strengthened by their faith in God. The Letter to the Hebrews compares them to sports fans in the stands of a stadium. The great cloud of witnesses, our faith ancestors, have already run their race, yet they remain to cheer on those still running and struggling.

The race the original Hebrew hearers of the letter were running with such perseverance was one of persecution as they heroically struggled to defend the fledgling faith and attract new followers in the face of physical torture and even death. Yet the writer of the letter calls us to look beyond this encouraging presence of witnesses to "Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith," because our faith ancestors ran their race looking to Jesus.

The great cloud of witnesses now have run their race, but their stories remain to inspire and lead us. When faced with challenges that can make us want to run away, to hide, we can draw hope and inspiration from the stories, the experiences, of our faith ancestors. Moses led the overwhelmed and desperate Israelites to freedom when he parted the Red Sea. The walls of Jericho fell after a week as Rahab dared to receive the spies. Gideon risked his life to destroy the temples of the pagan gods, and Barak risked his life to save the Israelites from foreign oppression. Samson, a man who was physically strong yet morally weak tells a story of reassurance and acceptance. Jephthah's story tells of a rejected, illegitimate child who became a man of faith and a judge of Israel. David used both his military and music talents for the glory of

God and bravely continued his royal leadership despite numerous attempts on his life. The prophets, as Jeremiah demanded, must know who spoke the truth to be led towards God, not away from God's truth and promises. Over and over God is made known through our faith ancestors.

Our story is rich with the faith-filled legacy and inspiration of our ancestors who persevered in faith. Times of courage, creativity, patience, trust, quick thinking, and perseverance are values held up as lived experiences that are passed down as an intangible yet priceless part of our inheritance. When we are committed to and engage in the hard work of living faithfully we are indeed in great company.

Remembering the stories of the past, telling our stories now, keeps us connected with the great cloud of witnesses as we continue to run with our faith ancestors and to Jesus, the perfecter of our faith. As Christian writer Frederick Buechner wisely says, "My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours...it is precisely through these stories in all their particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God makes himself known to each of us more powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually."

What is the story that you tell? How are the faith and the values that have shaped you and define you shared with those who are younger? How are your lived experiences passed down as an intangible yet priceless part of your legacy? How is God known powerfully and personally through the story that you tell?

Today as we baptized Brayden we affirmed and witnessed that Jesus Christ calls us to make disciples of all nations and to offer them the gift of grace in baptism. We celebrated this good news by promising our love, care and support for him, just as others once did for us, and someday he will do for others. With his baptism, Brayden today begins his own story, a story of faith, perseverance, trust and courage, a story repeated over and over again by our faith ancestors that powerfully and personally shows God being made known in our lives. Amen.