

“The Right Stuff”

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

How many of you got to see that amazing projection of Apollo 11 on the Washington Monument a couple of weeks back? D’aun and I were absolutely thrilled getting to watch it. It inspired me to watch a rerun of that old astronaut movie, “The Right Stuff.” If there was ever a movie to inspire the desire in us for heroes with the “right stuff”, it’s that one. Perhaps it was because I had just reread an old New York Times article on heroes that all this spoke to me this way. The Times article had asked, “Where have all the heroes gone?” The article lamented our being obsessed with celebrity instead of substance. The writer blamed a host of things for this, including reality TV for focusing on, as it was put, the antics of the idol and famous, instead of the epics of the good and courageous. The article went on to call for resources that can again kindle a desire in us for the truly heroic.

That writer was dead-on. As the events of these past weeks demonstrate, if we have ever lived in a time that needs heroes, people who stand in the breach, who stand at the risk, and even the cost, of their careers and, perhaps, lives for the truly heroic, it is this time. We need to be done with the petty personal position, and the self-aggrandizing agenda. We do need resources that kindle in us the heroic.

One of the greatest resources I know that does kindle that desire for the truly heroic, is the Bible. As one of our leading Civil Rights leaders has said, it is the Bible that taught him to believe that he could become heroic. Growing up in poverty, a fatherless child in South Carolina, he had, he says, one real asset. He went to church. And, it was there that he heard about the great heroes of the Bible. He knew in his heart that if God could use them in great ways, God could use him too. That was the greatest influence, he says, in helping him believe in what he could become.

That same influence has helped make heroes of some other folks with whom we are all familiar. The first American to orbit the Earth, John Glen. The first woman to go into outer-space, Sally Ride. The second man to walk on the moon, Buz Aldrin. I mention these three, because none of us doubt their status as heroes. As that movie I just saw again still puts it, they have had “the Right Stuff.” I mention these three specifically because, first, I’ve met with them, and second, because one of them, Sally Ride, speaking for all three, told me that a significant part of that “Right Stuff” was given to them, while growing up, from the heroic epics of the Bible they learned in their homes and churches.

The Bible has something to say to you and me, this morning, about what makes a real hero; about just what that “Right Stuff” is. In our Epistle lesson from the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, the Bible’s gallery of heroes is displayed with pride. Hear their names again: Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sara, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel; as well as many who are not named here, but are named elsewhere, such as, Ruth, Esther, Caleb, Mary, Anna, Pricilla and Aquila, Martha, Ananias, Junia and Lydia. Heroes, every one.

The point is, their story can be your story and mine; for God is still in the business of making heroes. You and I can be heroic, if we choose. So, of what kind of “stuff” are heroes made? Here are three “right” ingredients to look at this morning; the three most important.

And the first ingredient in that “right stuff” is this: Courage. Look at our Biblical hero’s and their stories; it’s clear that courage is a major element in their lives. But, their courage only became apparent in the face of hardship. It’s also clear that they would have preferred comfort to courage. But, God called them away from comfort. To Elijah, who was hiding in a cave, God said, “What are you doing here, Elijah, I have something better for you to do.” To Moses, hiding-out on his father-in-

law's farm in Midian, not wanting to go back to the dangers of Egypt; complaining that he couldn't be a leader, God said, "I don't care if you don't think you're a leader. I'll tell you what to do." And, to Paul, plagued by some "thorn" in his flesh, as he called it, from which he was not released, God said only, "Keep on going. I'll give you the strength. My grace is sufficient for you."

Courage is a resource, an ingredient of heroism that God gives us when we are fighting giants. Fighting giants is the key. If we never go out to face the giants of our time, then we will never need to be given courage. Sometimes, we face giants in the moral arena: ethics on the job, faithlessness in the face of great temptation. Some of the most courageous people I know will never make the cover of a magazine, nor get an interview on a talk show. Their courage is not always recognized for the greatness within them that it is. But, they stand for what is right.

Of course, life itself sometimes visits giants upon us: A fatal disease, the loss of a loved one, the end of a dream or career. Yet, the courageous refuse to let go of their faith in such times, even when to give up or give in to despair would seem the reasonable thing, perhaps the only thing. Instead, they find strength from God to go on and to rise again. It is in the facing of the giants that they become people of great courage. Courage is the first ingredient in the "Right Stuff" of heroism.

And the second ingredient in that "Right Stuff" is this: Character. Many of us can remember the story of Sir Galahad and his search for the "Holy Grail." Remember how this gallant knight was described? "His strength was as the strength of ten, because his heart was pure." A pure heart; that's often how we think of character.

Like with the characters of George Trendle. When Detroit's radio station WXYZ was in its heyday, it was responsible for the creation of three different heroes: The Lone Ranger, the Green Hornet, and King

(the dog in “Sergeant Preston of the Yukon”). Station manager George W. Trendle had suggested the main ingredients for the creation of each hero. Of the character of the Lone Ranger, he said, “The Lone Ranger always uses perfect English, no slang or questionable words. He won’t ever cast aspersions at any race or religious group. He will be unfailingly fair. Make him serious... Remember, he is a sober-minded man with a righteous purpose. Make the kids look up to him. Make him a hero.” Trendle felt that it was important for a hero to always be good and righteous.

But, when we look at the Biblical heroes, a lot of them wouldn’t have measured up to Trendle’s demands; at least, not at first. You see, they weren’t created to have character, they were grown to have character. We have only to mention Jacob, the conniving scoundrel, cheating his own family left and right. Or, Joseph, the self-righteous and self-involved little brother. Or, Rahab, the harlot, to realize that God’s heroes didn’t start out with the requisite ingredient of character. But, with God’s direction, they grew into the great people they became.

In this day when we are concerned over the character, or lack thereof, of many of our cultural and political leaders, it is all the more important than ever that you and I be persons of character. Young people are looking for role models, and others are looking for the stalwarts who can be counted on to do what’s right in any circumstance. Now, don’t panic in that thought. With God, it doesn’t matter where we started, or how far we have yet to go; only that we have put ourselves into God’s path. With God’s direction your character and mine can grow to heroic proportions. Character is the second ingredient in the “Right Stuff” of the heroic life.

And, here’s the third ingredient in this “Right Stuff”: Faith. This ingredient is mentioned more than any other in our lesson this morning. In reading this list of Biblical heroes, what really strikes me

about these women and men is not how “heroic” they were, but how human, how down-to-earth, how very much like you and me they were. They were not born with all that courage and character. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, these traits were grown in them because of their faith.

NBC is already doing promo’s for next summer’s Olympics. It’s an attempt to start getting us excited now; probably because they own the broadcast rights, and they want to be sure that we’ll be watching. So, they’re airing segments of past victories and tales of heroism in the face of difficulties. One of our past, great, Gold winning Olympians, Mary Lou Renton, had this to say about heroes recently. She said, “I’ve grown up in a world of superheroes: Wonder Woman, Superman, Captain Marvel the Fantastic Four. Ordinary people like me, without super powers or limbs that stretch for miles or the ability to change form, well, we can’t be heroes. Or can we? That long list in Hebrews contains a telling phrase: ‘They were weak, but became strong.’ It seems,” she continues, “that strength and super-powers are not prerequisites for hero-ness. God’s heroes are weak people who have simply made themselves available. Being a hero is not ducking into a phone booth and putting on tights and a flashy costume...It is acknowledging our weakness and limitations and making all that we have available to God.” What a statement of faith! She’s nailed it.

That is how God’s heroes happen: they aren’t born; they’re made. Everyone here has the potential for greatness in them because we have a great God. Each of us can be a hero by faith in Jesus Christ. He will give you and me the courage to face the giants. He will grant us the character in the times of testing. All it takes is the faith to trust in him, to follow his direction, and to make ourselves available. That’s how to become a hero with “The Right Stuff.”