

A man slipped and fell from a cliff
 Bouncing and tumbling downward
 His hand brushed a low hanging tree branch
 He reached back... grabbed it... and hung there.
 Over the sound of the cascading rubble he shouted...

Is anybody up there?

Then a voice...

I am here. I am the Lord your God. Do you believe me?

Yes Lord. I believe. Really. But I can't hang on much longer!

***It's okay. If you really believe... you have nothing to worry about.
 I will save you. Now just let go of the branch.***

Long pause...

Anybody else up there?

This week's readings are all about ***Faith!***

Dictionary says it's

Trust... Confidence... Conviction...

Credence... Reliance... Dependence...

Belief...

That's ***Faith!***

But faith in what?

Your job? Your car? Your bank account?

Your spouse? Your kids? Your parents?

Your neighborhood? Your nation?

What about ***Faith... in God?***

In today's epistle...

The Hebrew people heard how their slavery ended...

They escaped from Egypt when the Red Sea parted...

And created an escape route...

Then slammed shut behind them... Drowning their enemies...

They heard how their ancestors marched around Jericho
And the walls came tumbling down

And there are others mentioned...
Rahab... Gideon... Barak... Samson... David... Samuel...

If their stories are unfamiliar...
Take your bulletin home... and *Google* them

They conquered kingdoms,
administered justice,
obtained promises,
shut the mouths of lions,
quenched raging fire,
escaped the edge of the sword,
found strength in weakness,
won battles,
routed foreign armies.

Simply by being... *faithful!*
But it wasn't easy
Some were tortured.
Others were mocked and flogged
some chained and imprisoned.
Some were stoned to death,
Some were sawn in two... killed by the sword

They were destitute, persecuted, and tormented
By the worst of humanity.
They lived in deserts and mountains and caves
Even holes in the ground.

All these brave, remarkable people
 commended for their faith
 did **not** receive what was promised...
 for God provided... *something better*
 that they would *be made perfect*.

These people are not common... they are rare... and precious...

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*
True disciples are always few in number.
Do not put your hopes in large numbers
for true disciples will always be few.

If you think you need to win a gold medal
 Stand on the highest platform
 To do the work, God has given you to do...

You're missing the point

There is a much bigger prize...
Way too big to fit on... even... a 50-foot ultra high-definition TV

It says in the passage right after this one

*Discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time,
 but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness
 to those who have been trained by it.*

So... if you hear God's call... to be *faithful*...
 And you believe you are completely unprepared
 And totally unqualified
 Then it's probably real... and you need to take that call.

One great thing about following Jesus...

Is that we never are never alone.

As it says in Hebrews 12...

we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses!

Who stand *with us*...

Faithfully... willingly... bravely...

Everyone Christian... young and old... men and women...

everyone... including all of you...

are *called* to be *faithful*...

I hope and pray... that everyone... accepts that call.

Especially... all of you here today!

But what if ?

What if life gets hard?

What if there are difficulties... challenges... obstacles...

We persevere! We run the race! We don't quit! We persevere!

Just like great athletes... We go back to the basics... the fundamentals...

We pray... we listen... and then step boldly into the tasks before us

We pray... we listen... ***and step boldly***

We are all getting older.

And I've heard this from many...

Getting old is not for wimps!

Aging requires ***toughness!***

So if we can deal with getting older

Then we can deal with being faithful

Getting older is not an excuse to reject faith in God
 In fact just the opposite
 A visitor once asked why so many older people attended Bible Studies

They're studying for finals!

That ***great cloud of witnesses*** includes Moses!
 Who led the people out of slavery... at the ripe old age of 80
 Then delivered them to the promised land... when he was 120.

We can do this! Not by ourselves
 But surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses
We won't just survive... we will thrive!
 But there will be hardship. But it will not break us.

A man saw a cocoon where a butterfly wriggled to get free.
 The man decided to help the struggling creature
 Carefully, he slit the cocoon with his pocketknife.
 When the butterfly emerged... but it was too weak to fly... to survive.
 Not struggling... was a death sentence.

So it is for us.
 Faith always involves struggle...
 The road to discipleship is the pathway to heaven
 But it is a bumpy road...
 Physically... emotionally... and spiritually

But it is soooo worth it!

*The letter to the Hebrews continues...
 Do you see what this means?
 All these pioneers who blazed the way?
 All these veterans cheering us on?
 It means we'd better get on with it.
 Strip down, start running... and never quit!
 No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins.
 Keep your eyes on Jesus,
 who both began and finished this race we're in.
 Study how he did it.
 Because he never lost sight of where he was headed
 that exhilarating finish in and with God
 he could put up with anything along the way:
 Cross, shame, whatever.
 And now he's there,
 in the place of honor,
 right alongside God.*

*When you find yourselves flagging in your faith,
 go over that story again,
 item by item,
 that long litany of hostility he plowed through.
 That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!*

And quite frankly... we're going to need it.
 In today's gospel reading...
One of the most difficult passages to hear
 Jesus said...

*Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?
 No, I tell you, but rather division!
 Father against son... and son against father,
 mother against daughter... and daughter against mother,*

That's hard to hear... Hard to hear

Jesus said,
***I came to bring fire to the earth,
and how I wish it were already kindled!***

A couple years ago, a pastor told me a story
About his first days serving at a very broken church
Filled with broken people.
They were angry... and they were cruel.

A few weeks after he started, they called a meeting
An angry voice rang out.
I move... that the pastor resign.

Held his breath. Heart pounding. Terrified. His job on the line.
And then he realized... He wasn't alone
That great cloud of witnesses stood were with him.

When he finally spoke... he said...

The motion was not seconded. We are adjourned.

He served that church for more than a decade
Because... in the midst of division and hatred... he loved them.
As Jesus loved him...

You see that's how we get through the trials and tribulations
Not by getting defensive and pushing back
Not by escalating conflict
But by diluting it... with love...

*Are you willing to fall in love with them
Even though they'll break your heart?
Can you cast your fears of God's big shoulders
Find your way when it's so dark?
Will you show the light of Christ to them
As they rip your life apart?
Are you willing to fall in love with them
Even though they'll break your heart?*

That's what faith looks like...

Real faith...

Is walking along side the great cloud of witnesses...

And doing just what they did

Have Faith... in God.

Amen.