

## LIVING FOR AN UNFULFILLED PROMISE

Scriptures: Hebrews 11:1, 8-22, 39-40; Deuteronomy 34:1-8

This morning I would like to play for you an excerpt from a 65 year-old radio broadcast. On July 20, 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt gave a speech to the Democratic National Convention accepting their nomination to a fourth term as President. It was a poignant moment. Just one and a half months earlier allied troops had landed on Normandy and were pushing toward Germany. In the Pacific, American naval and marine forces inched slowly island by island toward the Japanese coast. There was fierce fighting on both fronts. At that moment in history, this was how Franklin Roosevelt began his speech:

It seems wholly likely that within the next four years our armed forces, and those of our allies, will have gained a complete victory over Germany and Japan, sooner or later, and that the whole world once more will be at peace—under a system, we hope that will prevent a new world war. In any event, whenever that time comes, new hands will then have full opportunity to realize the ideals which we seek.

I was struck by that last sentence: “In any event, whenever that time comes new hands will then have full opportunity to realize the ideals which we seek.” I am not sure what Roosevelt meant by that, but it seemed prophetic. As it turned out, it did not take four years for the war to end; it took about one year. Germany surrendered on May 7, 1945, less than nine months after Roosevelt’s speech, and Japan surrendered on September 2, 1945, just over a year after Roosevelt spoke these words. The irony is that Roosevelt himself did not live to see it. He died on April 12, 1945, less than a month before victory in Europe and less than five months before victory over Japan. The hope he envisioned was turned over to new hands.

Memorial Day is a time to remember loved ones who have died, especially men and women in the armed forces who gave their lives in fighting for freedom and peace. Franklin Roosevelt was not alone in dying before the promise of peace was fulfilled. During World War II, 291,557 American soldiers died in battle. Every single one of them gave their lives for a hope not fulfilled in their lifetime.

That is the story of almost every hero of faith in the Bible. It starts with Abraham and Sarah. God promised to give Abraham and Sarah many descendants, but the only descendants they had before Sarah died was one son named Isaac. Eventually Sarah became the mother of a great nation: the people of Israel, but in her lifetime she never saw even a single grandchild.

Then there was Moses. For forty years Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, and right up to the border of the Promised Land—the land that had been promised many years earlier to Abraham. On that forty year trek through the wilderness Moses faced three major wars, two insurrections, a famine, drought, and a plague, and after all that when the people of Israel finally arrived at the Jordan River ready to cross over into the Promised Land, Moses died. He saw the Promised Land from the top of Mt. Nebo, but he never set foot in it.

Bible scholars have speculated about why it happened that way. Some scripture passages imply that Moses committed an offense against God which made him ineligible to enter the Promised Land. But that is never really explained. The Bible gives us no clear reason why Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. It just happened that way.

It happened that way for most of the people in the Bible. Listen again to our second scripture lesson. After describing some of the great heroes of faith in the Bible, Hebrews 11:13 says, "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them." In other words, Moses wasn't alone. Abraham wasn't alone. Franklin D. Roosevelt wasn't alone. Most of us who follow Jesus must live for a promise that we will not see fulfilled in our lifetime.

This summer I am beginning a new study leave project that I call "The Genealogy of a Church." My goal is not to tell the history of Hamblen Park Presbyterian Church but to trace its genealogy. In other words, who are the people who brought the message of Jesus to Hamblen, and who are the people who brought the message to them, and who brought the story of Jesus to those earlier folks? A genealogy is the list of your ancestors who passed on to you your DNA. The genealogy of a church is the list of those people and institutions who passed on to you your faith. I am hoping before I am finished three years from now to trace our genealogy of faith all the way back to Jesus.

I have already discovered one interesting thing: many of the leaders of the United Presbyterian Church of North America who helped start Hamblen Park Presbyterian Church never got to see how it turned out. The organizing pastor of our church was a man named Russell Boorher who was sent here from Washtucna. When he came in 1956 Thurston and Crestline was on the edge of the city. There was not much south and east of here except farmland. He started this church with a few dozen people who during their first year gave about \$5,000. That, and about \$4,000 in mission aid from the United Presbyterian denomination was all they had that first year. Russell Boorher left Hamblen after only two years. He never got to see what finally happened.

One of the charter members of our church was a man named George Maddison, who was also one of its first treasurers. The story is told that one day George was counting the offering after church. Another church member asked, "How are we doing?" George said, "We've got \$12 and none of the bills are paid." George Maddison died 20 years ago this spring. He never saw the new sanctuary that was built here in 1995. He never saw a church with three pastors, 800 members, and a budget of over \$600,000. I don't know if he dreamed of such things, but if he did, he did not live to see it happen.

That is often how following Jesus works. When you commit your life to follow Jesus, you do not always see the results of that commitment in your lifetime. Two weeks ago I told about a Vacation Bible School teacher that I had in second grade. This teacher asked if any of us wanted to pray with her to invite Jesus to come into our lives and be our Savior and Lord. A few of us did. We stayed after class, knelt down next to our little wooden chairs, and prayed with her that Jesus would be our Savior and Lord. The irony is that after that week of Vacation Bible School, I never saw that teacher again. Early in the fall my father was sent to a new Air Force

base and we moved. That Vacation Bible School teacher never knew what become of the young student she taught in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, but she did it anyway. She was part of a genealogy of faith that she trusted others to complete.

If you sign up to teach Vacation Bible School or Sunday School or to help with the youth group, you may never see what finally happens with your efforts. You may not see in your lifetime the whole story of how God will work in the lives of your own children or grandchildren. I hope I am around to see my children grow old and maybe even some grandchildren some day. But the truth is God's work in their lives might not be finished by the time I am gone. In fact it probably won't be finished. But that does not mean it is wasted. The God who began a good work through us can bring it to completion, just as God did with Abraham, just as God did with Moses, just as God did with my Vacation Bible School teacher. The God who began a good work through us can bring it to completion, even if it takes longer than our own lifetime to finish it.

We started with the radio broadcast of a speech by Franklin Roosevelt less than nine months before he died. I want to close with a speech given by Martin Luther King Jr. on the night before he died. On April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination, Martin Luther King gave a speech in Memphis, TN, and he concluded with these words:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

We are all of us living for a promise yet to be fulfilled—the day when God's kingdom will come and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

- Ken Onstot  
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