

“What Better Example?”

“ . . . let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . . .” As those words were being written, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews had just completed an entire chapter on the myriad examples of faith that are to be found in the Old Testament — Abel, Enoch and Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel, and the prophets — all powerful examples of faith at work for God’s purposes.

We would do well to consider the counsel of the Epistle writer and bone up on what the lives behind those names can teach us about walking and living by faith. But in spite of that ***“great cloud of witnesses,”*** the writer winds up telling us not to look there — or perhaps better said, *“don’t get stuck looking there.”*

There is a focus for us, the value of which none of these can begin to approximate. He tells us to look to ***“Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . . .”*** Those are interesting words! ***“Pioneer.”*** We get visions of Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Lewis and Clark — all those brave men and women (lest we forget Sacagawea) who explored unchartered territories, blazing a trail for others to follow. The writer of Hebrews has something of that in mind, I’m sure; but it goes much deeper. The Greek word is ἀρχηγος, (archenos) which carries the root for our word *“architect.”* The word is best translated *“Beginner”* *“Originator”* *“Founder”* — or, as did J.B. Phillips (The New Testament in Modern English): *“Source.”*

Then the Hebrews author adds: ***“Perfecter.”*** That Greek word is τελειωτης (teleiotes) from the root word that means *“to complete.”* You may recall one of Jesus’ Seven Last Words from the cross: ***“It is finished!”*** In Greek that’s “Τετελεσται!” (Tetelestai). Same root word.

Yes, Jesus is the one who is for us “*a model the godly life,*” as we pray often after the Eucharist. And yes, His perfection is what makes His sacrificial death efficacious (yet another interesting word) as an atonement for our sins. So we would never be wrong to think of Jesus in terms of His perfection. But I think the author of Hebrews is making another point here; and I think again J.B. Phillips has caught its essence. He translates (or rather, paraphrases) these words thus: “*Jesus, the source and goal of our faith.*”

That is deep theology: Jesus is the well from which we draw faith. Jesus is also the object and end of what and why we believe. Who we are, what we do, in what we hope, how we think, where we are going — all of this is shaped and brought into being by Jesus.

So, yes! We can look to someone like Abraham and be inspired. Over the past several Sundays, we have heard of his faith, his prayers, his willingness to go where God wanted him to go. But we have not heard about his questions, or the ways by which he tried to wrest from God control of the future that God had promised. Abraham’s idolatry, his fears, his downright cruelty to Hagar and Ishmael never get mentioned while we talk of him as a model, an example.

But all of that should be in the picture. Not to belittle Abraham, but to encourage us to recognize that God does make use of flawed human beings to bring about His designs. That means there is hope for us.

But Hebrews recognizes the other side of that hope: there is no model or example that can lead us to perfection. Even the model of Jesus cannot do that. When we see the perfection of Jesus, what we come to recognize is how far short of such an ideal we fall. That’s not hope-inducing; that’s depressing. So what do we do? “*... run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus*” — but not as simply a model for us to emulate.

To be sure, we can certainly benefit from patterning our lives to Christ’s, and this we should do . . . and I will focus on one facet of that

in a moment . . . but we should look to Jesus as the beginning and end of our faith! Everything we are is wrapped up in Jesus: all hope, all longing, all identity, all purpose, all we are . . . all in Jesus, only Jesus, completely Jesus, first and last: Jesus! Because in Jesus we see not just a good role model. When people are asked by pollsters to comment on Jesus, one of the prominent responses is that “*Jesus was a good man. A wonderful teacher. A fine example. A hero.*” And that’s fine — as far as it goes. It just doesn’t go very far at all.

Here’s the problem with models and examples (now I know the following example comes with a risk, but I’m going to risk it nonetheless). Suppose you watched Kevin Durant for days and weeks, analyzing, probing, charting his behaviors in a quest to learn how to dunk a basketball. After hours of such research, you have a solid footing in the mechanics, techniques, and skills involved in dunking a basketball. So . . . are you ready to dunk the ball? No! Know why? You ain’t Kevin Durant. No matter how much you were to try to emulate him, you are not he! I will never be six foot ten. I could match him on weight, but that’s about it! Could I learn something about dunking from Kevin? I’m sure I could. That doesn’t mean I can do it! It is much more so with Jesus.

I can see all that Jesus did [or not! Which is another limitation we encounter] but I cannot BE Jesus. Praise God, I don’t have to be Jesus. Jesus has been all the Jesus that is necessary. What I need to do is wrap myself in Jesus — I don’t even have to do that, because He has already done it. “*I am covered over by the precious blood of Jesus,*” goes one song, “*and He lives in me.*” Those lyrics conclude: “*So when God looks at me He sees not what I used to be, but He sees Jesus.*” Because Jesus is the source and the goal of our faith, indeed of our very being.

But now listen to Him in today’s Gospel: “***Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!***” I have to this point made it sound like all is sweetness and light. Jesus

wants us to know that He came to shake things up. That will mean that He wants to shake you up, as well. *“Hold on, Pastor! It was fine until you brought in this stuff! Why do I have to get shaken up? Why can’t I just be stirred a little, or maybe a gentle nudge?”*

Let me give two examples: Some time ago, a Dutch Bishop by the name of Tiny Muskens (yes, his actual name) suggested that everyone — Muslims, Christian, Jews — should all start using the name “Allah.” To quote the Bishop: *“Allah is a very beautiful word for God. Shouldn’t we all say that from now on we will name God Allah? . . . What does God care what we call him? It is our problem.”* On the other side of the coin, a Baptist Pastor in California by the name of Wiley S. Drake that very same week urged his flock to pray for the deaths of those who had lodged a complaint against him with the IRS. Both of these men will claim that they are following Jesus — would you agree they could use a little shaking up?

Now, what should we do with the name of God? I have an answer, and it isn’t in agreement with the dear Bishop [to whom I might suggest that he read today’s First Lesson]. What should we do with enemies? Again, I have an answer, and Pastor Drake won’t want to hear it. Jesus had some radical answers to questions like that. They shake us to our foundations.

This is because He is to be our foundation. He is the source. He is the goal. The beginning and the end.

Bracelets (and other paraphernalia) are to be found all over the map with the letters WWJD? They stand for: *“What Would Jesus Do?”* [That whole campaign was the brainchild of a Lutheran DCE in California.] I have no great problem with WWJD (although I did see recently that someone suggested the letters stand for *“Who Wants Jelly Donuts?”* I could get down with that!), but I hold no great hope for it either.

It is limited by using Jesus as no more than a model, an example. I think the better question is WIJIY? *“Who is Jesus in You?”* Has He shaken

you down to your core, so that all that remains is He? Not in me, either. But that is what He wants to do. He wants to shape and mold us so that nothing remains of importance or value to us other than being what He wants us to be.

He invites us in deeper. More than an hour on Sunday (a time period some have taken to think had been carved in granite on Mt. Sinai). More than an occasional dip into the Word. More than a short prayer, or a minute's meditation or devotion. He wants us in Him and He in us . . . fully, completely, wholly, unreservedly, powerfully, joyously, hopefully, faithfully.

Jesus said He came to bring fire. There are several metaphors from the Bible that relate to fire and what it does: It purifies, that is, it removes the bad from the good — for example, Jesus' parable about the wheat and tares (Matthew 13). Fire is a sign of judgment, of total destruction, as when the disciples wanted to rain down fire on some Samaritans (Luke 9). It is a sign of God's presence, as we see on Pentecost as the Spirit comes as tongues of fire (Acts 2). Fire is an apocalyptic sign of the last times. It is a means of warmth and light. It was the primary way of presenting both animal and grain sacrifices. Fire is connected to the Word of God, as we hear in today's First Lesson: ***“Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”*** Fire is a metaphor for passion and commitment (political pundits often question whether this or that candidate has sufficient “fire in the belly” to make the run for office).

All of these are images of power — either destructive or uplifting. I suspect that Jesus had most of these in mind as He speaks of the fire He came to bring. But He is insistent that it is fire (the Greek literally reads *“Fire I possess to bring!”*) And, to emphasize its importance, Jesus tells us ***“how I wish it were already kindled!”*** If I were Jesus (good thing I'm not!), I would have been absolutely frustrated by those disciples and their slowness to pick up on what Jesus was teaching them. But He showed enormous patience with them, borne out of love

for them, because He knew they could not grasp all of Him without the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

I think many modern Christians are amazed at the transformation of those disciples on Pentecost, but we should not be. Jesus had laid the solid foundation for the Spirit to lead them to all truth. All (“all!!” Ha!) the Spirit had to do was bring to their remembrance what Jesus had taught them. So, in a sense the fire was kindled (at least the kindling was prepared and ready for the spark). Jesus is likewise patient with us. We who often don’t “get it.” We who are often distracted. We whose passion is rather subdued.

Do you “*wish it were already kindled*” the spark just waiting to be ignited? Let us pray that it will be:

Gracious Lord Jesus, You came to bring fire, and we constantly hose down the message into sop. By Your Spirit, draw us close, ever closer, ever deeper into You. Engage us, surround us, infuse us with You. Excite us, ignite us, engulf us with You. You before us, You behind us, You in us. You and always You and ever You. Set us ablaze as Your people. In Your strong Name we pray.

And let all God’s people say, “Amen.”