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Hebrews 11:29-12:2

## **SANCTUARY: STAYING THE COURSE**

Something I look forward to every year during the summer is the three weeks in July when the Tour de France becomes the center of the biking world. Despite the scandal that's plagued the tour in recent years, I find it hard to resist watching racers who've endured hour upon hour on their bikes during training, month after month, vying with each other for the prize of being on the podium in Paris.

One of the most arduous sporting events in the world, the Tour sees 176 riders on 22 teams suffer in the saddle day after day, persevering over a 2,000+ mile course that features some of the most sublime and the most challenging terrain a road racer could ever face—all in pursuit of the vaunted maillot jaune—the YELLOW JERSEY.

**What casual watchers may not understand is that riding in the Tour de France is a team sport, and that only the strongest, most well-coordinated, and collective work of a team of 8 riders will enable their team leader to achieve victory over the course of the three week race, reaching the Champs Elysées in Paris wearing Yellow.**

Oh there are other colors that are part of the rich tradition of the Tour: the green jersey for the best sprinter; the polka dot jersey for the king of the mountain stages; the white jersey for the best new rider. But it's the YELLOW JERSEY everyone dreams to wear—even if only for a single stage of the race.

**This year's winner of the Tour was a surprise.** Colombian Egan Bernal—riding for Team Ineos—became, at age 22, both the youngest rider in the 106-year history of the race—and the first Latin American rider, to wear Yellow in Paris.

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” writes the author of Hebrews, “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.”

I love Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage in The Message. It reads:

Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we had 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....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 [and others before him] plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. (Colorado Springs:NavPress, 2002)

Since his unexpected win in the Tour de France Egan Bernal has been flooded with media coverage. Everyone, it seems, wants a piece of his story. “From a young age, one childhood friend said, “He had an insatiable hunger for victory. He is like an eagle that puts his eye on a goal and doesn’t let go.”<sup>2</sup>

**You can glimpse the makings of myth already being constructed around Bernal, can you not? And it’s no surprise, really. For we are a species hungry for a good story.**

**“In recent decades,” Mary Foskett points out, “best seller lists have been tracking the rise of the memoir.”**

“In our high-tech age where the art of conversation has been waning, our hunger for stories has only grown...[and] we long especially for the stories of ordinary people who share from the depth of their lives all the complexity of being human. We want to hear the stories of others because in them we recognize our own experience and discover a greater sense of belonging.”<sup>3</sup>

**How many of us have ever listened to the MOTH RADIO HOUR?<sup>4</sup>**

For a story to be told on MOTH the formula is simple: MOTH stories are true, as remembered by the storyteller, and always told live. Folks are invited to make a pitch for sharing a real-life story, and if they’re selected, they’re given the opportunity to share that story before a live audience with no notes. Started in 2009 on a single station, MOTH now airs on more than 500 stations nationwide.

**We hunger for story because it’s in stories that we find—and we make—meaning.**

**In today’s reading, the writer of Hebrews speaks to a community in search of a story of belonging.**

- Perhaps they’ve grown weary of the challenges of the Christian life;
- Perhaps they’re feeling the pressure of cultural forces outside the community,
- Some, at least, seem to be struggling with their faith and others have stopped coming to gatherings altogether.

After enduring hardship and showing great love for one another in the past, this community has become—because of these stressors—less confident, less enthusiastic, and less cohesive.<sup>5</sup>

**So what does the writer do?** He tells them stories...stories of those who have gone before, living out their faith in God’s promises, and laying out the path of endurance for others to follow.

**Starting at the very beginning of the story of God’s people, he provides example after example of how God’s people, through faith in God’s promises, found a way to endure, against all odds.**

- Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob—the list grows...
- Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David—on he goes.

Through faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, won strength out of weakness, put armies to flight...

Still others suffered mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment, they were stoned, sawn in two, killed by the sword...

<sup>2</sup> Felix Baron, quoted in the Associated Press article in *The Washington Post*, August 7, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/tour-de-france-champion-gets-homecoming-fiesta-in-colombia/2019/08/07/9133240e-b92d-11e9-8e83-4e6687e99814\\_story.html?noredirect=on](https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/tour-de-france-champion-gets-homecoming-fiesta-in-colombia/2019/08/07/9133240e-b92d-11e9-8e83-4e6687e99814_story.html?noredirect=on)

<sup>3</sup> Mary Foskett, writing for Working Preacher, August 2019. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=2\\_foskett\\_mary](http://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=2_foskett_mary)

<sup>4</sup> <https://themoth.org/radio-hour>

<sup>5</sup> Foskett, op. cit.

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...(and here's the climax...)

THEREFORE, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

**To find ourselves in that company; to be baptized into Christ—yoked to him—means not only wading in the water; it means walking through fire.**

**That, it seems to me, is what Jesus is getting at in today's gospel.**

**With each step bringing him closer to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus tells his followers, "If it's complacency you're after, then you're following the wrong guy.**

**"If it's a quiet, peaceful, conflict-free life, you're hoping for, than you're on the wrong path."**

**Standing with me, Jesus says in no uncertain terms, necessarily means wading into conflict. If you follow me you're guaranteed to find trouble.**

**You may have read in yesterday's Seattle Time or heard it from some other source:**

- Our church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, meeting in assembly during the first full week of August, declared itself a sanctuary church, becoming the first North American denomination to do so.<sup>6</sup>
- As a sanctuary church the ELCA is committed to serving and supporting migrant children and families in communities across the country and at our nation's borders.

**Now, what does that mean?**

- In some ways, it's simply a way of saying more publicly: we intend to continue engaging in ministries that welcome the stranger, stand with the outcast, and advocate for the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and others who search of safety—in the same way we always have!
- **Friends, this is not a new stance.** The roots of these kinds of commitments go back to the very foundations of the Lutheran movement—and I'm not talking 1987 (when the ELCA was formed), I'm talking 1527.

During one of the four great epidemics of the Black Death that struck Europe—and over the course of two centuries claimed the lives of a full one-quarter of the population—the plague reached Wittenberg, where Martin Luther taught at the University and lived his wife Katie and children.

The date was August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1527, and fearing for the safety of Luther and the other professors at the university, Elector John ordered Luther and others to leave everything behind and head for the safe haven of Jena.<sup>7</sup>

But Luther, unmoved by the elector's letter or the pleas of his friends, chose to stay with Katie in Wittenberg to minister to the sick and frightened people.

Some weeks later the worst of it was over. Martin's own son, Hans, survived; and pregnant Katie gave birth to their healthy daughter Elizabeth.

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<sup>6</sup> Find out more here: <https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8000>

<sup>7</sup> Luther's Works, American Edition. Volume 43, page 115.

The plague appeared also in Breslau that year, and the question raised among the pastors of that city was whether it was proper for a Christian to flee in the face of such a deadly peril.

The clergy of Breslau decided to write to Luther to ask his advice. What he eventually wrote took the form of an open letter, and in that letter he argued that the Christian pastor, like a good shepherd, is commanded by Christ to stay despite the danger of death.

In fact, he wrote, ALL THOSE who by office have public responsibility for the citizenry are bound by those responsibilities to stay and help their neighbors.<sup>8</sup>

### **Helping neighbors in desperate need, you see, is written in our DNA as Lutherans.**

Through organizations like Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, Refugees Northwest, and Lutheran Community Services, our church has a long track record of coming alongside individuals and families who, for various reasons, are in dire need or have been forced from their homes and set on a course to search for a new place of safety.

Being a sanctuary church means committing ourselves to supporting and sheltering migrants, supporting the rule of law and the rights to due process, advocating on behalf of children and adults in detention centers, and in other ways walking beside all who need advocates and partners.

Included in the resolution at the churchwide assembly was a clause suggesting that the various ways this affirmation might be lived out among congregations needs to be carefully deliberated.

Our own church council will begin looking at the churchwide resolution when we meet this coming Tuesday. And if you want more about the assembly's decision, we have handouts ready for you to take and read after worship.<sup>9</sup>

But the thing I want to emphasize is that the idea of coming alongside beleaguered communities of people is not a radical new turn for our church—though in our highly politicized times it may feel that way.

It is instead a way of joining all those other communities of faithful people down through the centuries, going back to the very origins of our Judeo-Christian tradition, who took risks, stepping out in faith, trusting that God had called them to serve their neighbor in need—whatever that neighbor looked like, whatever their place of origin, whatever their need.

Whenever we do that, my friends, we put ourselves alongside that great cloud of witnesses, and we put ourselves alongside Jesus; declaring both to one another and to the world that we, like they, are in this work for the long haul.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> You can find more information at the ELCA website: [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCA\\_SanctuaryDenomination\\_TalkingPoints.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCA_SanctuaryDenomination_TalkingPoints.pdf)