

The Reverend Tasha L. Blackburn

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In The Middle

Hebrews 11: 29-12: 2

My brother was always the baby. As some of you may know, my parents were foster parents to several children, along with raising me and my brother. Our foster brothers and sisters varied in age a bit but one thing was consistent: my brother Daren was always the youngest. No matter who came and went in the house, Daren was the baby. Until one day. He was nine years old when Gary came to live with us and Gary was, according to his own announcement, three years old. For the first time in Daren's life we was no longer the baby. As you may have guessed, this did not go well at all. He began throwing tantrums. He acted needier than he had in years and he wasn't very nice to Gary. He looked for anything he could do to get back to that coveted position of youngest in the family because, even if it hadn't been perfect, being the baby was far better than being in the middle. He did not like it.

No one likes being in the middle. None of us do. We want to be first, deciding the plan, setting the future, receiving the applause. Or, if we cannot be first, even last might be better than the middle. At the last we're watching and learning from others' mistakes, getting sheltered, living as the favorite. But the middle, in the middle you get scrunched and squished. In the middle you aren't the first at anything and you aren't the last to leave an impression either. You are just stuck in the middle.

Our passage in Hebrews tells us a great deal about all of the people who are first. It began with last week's passage, if you remember when the writer highlighted for us the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Now the writer has continued and he is lifting up the great kings and judges and prophets and martyrs: Gideon and Barak, Daniel and Deborah, Samuel and David. All these were first, long before us. They set the future and their courage helped shape God's plan and so, for being first, they receive the applause of both earth and heaven.

Then the writer tells us that there is still a race being run. The events the first ones began are not finished yet. He feels certain that they will end soon, however. The race is almost won. He urges his readers to take the baton and finish the last lap. When he wrote this, he had every reason to believe that victory was in sight. Jesus had already come and promised, when he left, to come again. The end was certainly near. For his readers it is clear: we are the last. We are given the task of using all our speed and strength to finish what God has started. We will toss aside every weight so that we can run even faster, crossing the finish line where Christ stands.

The only problem is that this writer wrote Hebrews almost 2,000 years ago. When we read his words today it is difficult to believe that we are the last. Perhaps we are, since Jesus told us that we would not know the time when he would return. The only thing he promised is that it would be a surprise. So perhaps we are the last. But God's plan shows a far greater span than ancient people could have dreamed. It shows us that our God is far more patient than they knew. And probably, probably, we are not the last. We are probably in the middle.

It may not be the position we would have chosen but here it is. We are in the middle of God's great plan of salvation and history. We did not get to set the course and we, probably, will not get to finish it. In some ways this limits us. As individualistic as we may be and as our culture would have us be, we are part of something that is far greater than we are. God has been working this amazing plan for thousands of years and we are drawn up into it. We don't have the authority to simply say we are

not interested or we enjoy being spiritual alone at home. This is bigger than our own desires. God is moving it forward whether we like it or not and we do not have much say in the matter. In fact, as the folks in the middle, we have one task and one task only. If we follow the writer's metaphor, we are the middle leg of this race and our great moments in this come in how we take the baton and how we hand it off. That's where the suspense is and that is where we could falter. It is also where we could be our greatest. How we receive the faith that was handed to us and how we then pass it on is what our part of this race is about. We will not get the accolades of the first ones and we will probably not get the adrenaline of the last ones but our role is crucial just the same. We are charged with passing on God's plan for the future so that the race can continue.

As I said earlier, not many people like being in the middle. There is no great glory in it. But there is one thing about being in the middle of God's plan. When you are in the middle, you are surrounded. The writer of Hebrews tells us: we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses: all the saints who have come before us. They are watching us and cheering us and pressing us forward. We are also surrounded by those who come after us. They are young now but they will not be for long and they too are watching us, learning from us, waiting for the time when we will pass this great message of God's plan on to them. We are not alone in the middle. We are surrounded by such faith and faithfulness and what great comfort and courage that brings. We are not in this race alone! We are embraced by their encouragement and enveloped in their wisdom. Those who have gone before us and who support us now, are the reason we can run this race. And those who are to come are the reason we cannot stop now!

It is a great gift to be in the middle; to be enfolded in the center of God's plan. Like our psalm read today, we have such a history to turn to when we are in trouble. We can recall all of the amazing deeds of the Lord and our souls will be comforted. We have a history that can carry us and a future we get to pass on. So I say to you, along with the great cloud around us here: let's get going.

Amen.