

The Story of First Baptist Church
Hebrews 12:1-3, 12

April 29, 2012

Dr. Steve Horn

Introduction: Do you know what tomorrow is? Tomorrow, April 30, is the bicentennial of the Statehood of The Great State of Louisiana. Having become a territory of the United States in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, Louisiana became the 18th state of the union on April 30, 1812. Some of us have been praying this year since January that God, Himself, might do some mighty work in our state as we celebrate 200 years of statehood.

Since we have concluded last week our look at the story of God through the lens of human history, I wanted to at least take this Sunday, in remembrance of our bicentennial celebration of our state, to remember what God has done through this one local church—The First Baptist Church of Lafayette. Certainly, my heart is one of remembrance so that we might have thanksgiving, but also that we might be encouraged for the future that is before us. I begin with a familiar text from the book of Hebrews. The anonymous writer of Hebrews writes to a group of Christians in the first century to encourage them to persevere in the midst of persecution. He writes to them in such a way as to remind them of their past so that they might find their strength for the present and the motivation for the future. I read this text similarly today though we are not under the persecution that these first century saints were.

Text: ¹ Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, ² keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne.

³ For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, so that you won't grow weary and lose heart.

¹² Therefore strengthen your tired hands and weakened knees,

Introduction:

Life for the people to whom Hebrews was originally written was hard. They had done the unthinkable and unpopular in their culture. They had turned from a religion of the law and by God's grace had become followers of Jesus Christ. Because of their conversion, some had lost life, and all had lost favor from the unconverted culture around them. Struggling to find strength for the next day, the writer of Hebrews writes them this encouraging word we have called Hebrews. The letter reaches its crescendo in the glorious 11th chapter that recaptures the stories of faith of heroes of the past. Having recounted that past, the writer now says, "Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us." I could not help but think of this text this week as I prepared to share with us something of the story of First Baptist Church, for we too are surrounded with a large cloud of witnesses.

Though difficult to summarize the storied history of First Baptist Church in just a couple of sentences, perhaps these thoughts will help.

The People have been faithful!

There has been a lot of ink spilt across the ages on the precise meaning of the large cloud of witnesses. Some have taken this to mean that those who have gone on before us watch from Heaven how we are faring down here on earth. Others have taken this to mean that those who have gone on before us bear witness to the fact of God's faithfulness in the most desperate of circumstances. I certainly take the latter to be the meaning. Certainly today, we have reason to persevere in what God has called us to as a church because this is exactly the testimony of those who have come before us.

- **Pioneers**—As with the beginning of most anything, in order to have a beginning, someone must be the pioneer. I can't help but think that the beginning of First Baptist Church has its beginning almost 100 years before the church was even established. According Baptist historian, "Penrose St. Amant in his "A Short History of Louisiana Baptists" the first Baptist sermon ever preached in the state of Louisiana happened in 1803 (others including members of the Willis family date this at 1804) in the settlement that would be called Vermillionville first, then Lafayette, later. Imagine that? Right here where we call home, the first sermon by a Baptist minister was preached. Then, almost 100 years later in 1902, 5 pioneers, including the wife of the Sheriff and a professor and his wife from Southwestern Louisiana Industrial Institute established the First Baptist Church. It is because of people like these that I want to say, "Let's go! Let's keep on. Let's endure! Let's do what God has called us to do!"
- **Preachers**—Next, I think about the preachers that have come before me. Time does not permit me to talk about everyone, but let me mention two.

James I. Kendrick—E.K. Robinson was the first pastor. He was followed in 1904 by Kendrick. The historians record two little interesting facts about Kendrick. First, his house was the first house in Lafayette to have screens on the door and windows. (That's not really important. I just thought I might tell you that.) The second thing is of incredible importance. Kendrick became rather well known for riding his bicycle from door to door inviting everyone to church. I want to remind us today that this is the kind of spirit that is necessary in every generation to reach an entire city.¹

Perry R. Sanders—He led this church for 47 years. Time does not allow all that ought to be said about his leadership and legacy. Let me give you just this one thought. Before he became pastor in 1959, he wrote a letter to the church. I've seen that letter. He asks the church to support him in several things. The most important is that the church would always have some kind of evangelistic outreach program. Our FAITH program today is a direct result of the faithfulness of carrying out that request for now over 50 years.

- **People**—Ultimately, though, it is not the preachers that have made the difference, but the people have made the difference. Under Bro. Perry's leadership, you always heard that the "people are the church." In fact, the way that you heard that through the years goes like this....

So, indeed the people for now 110 years have been faithful. However, the more important truth to our story and the more important truth in the Letter to the Hebrews is...

¹ Arnold F. Nelson, *A History of Baptist French Missions in South Louisiana*, p. 57.

God has been faithful!

- **Humble Beginnings**—We already said that the church began with 5 members. By the time the second pastor came along, the church had experienced incredible growth and had become a membership of 3! But, Pastor Kendrick rolled up his sleeves and aired up the tires of his bicycle and went to work. When I think about the faithfulness of God through the years, I always think about the story of Bro. Kendrick going to the bank to open up an account. He was declined. The smiling banker told him that there would never be enough Baptists in Lafayette to need a bank account. By 1959, though, First Baptist Church would get a loan to build a building that at that time was the largest made by the Lafayette Building Association.² I like the way that Bro. Perry told that story. He would always conclude by saying, “And that bank that turned the church away has long since been out of business.
- **Depression era of the 1930s**—The 1930’s tell a story of God’s faithfulness to our church. Like the rest of the country, the 1930s brought the Great Depression. The pastor during this time was J.C. Wells. Things at one point got so desperate that the church could not afford to pay the pastor his salary of \$150 per month. The pastor agreed to have his salary lowered to \$125 per month. But records indicate that at one time the church owed the pastor over \$300 in salary to him that they could not pay. But, God was faithful. Before the decade was over, the church became the first church of any denomination in South Louisiana to be broadcasting live over the radio and the church had established its first mission, the Mitchell Mission, now Northside Baptist Church. God is faithful!
- **Oil Bust of the 1980s**—In more recent times, God’s faithfulness was evident through the days of the oil bust. Many of you can remember that literally thousands left our city and hundreds left our church to move to different cities. I remember the bumper stickers that read, “The last one out of Lafayette, turn off the lights.” Many of those who remained had no jobs. But God was faithful. Even though hundreds left the city and the church, the decade of the 1980s rendered the most baptisms than any other period in the life of First Baptist Church.
- **Fire of 1999**—In yet more recent days, there was the fire of 1999. The sanctuary burned to the ground. Perhaps there is no greater reminder of God’s faithfulness through the years than this pulpit—about the only thing that remained. Can’t you just hear God say, “The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever.” (Isaiah 40:8)

So, what about the future?

“Therefore strengthen your tired hands and your weakened knees.”

As we think of the future, God will be faithful—of that we do not have to worry. Will we be faithful?

² Newspaper article from *The Daily Advertiser*, April 29, 1984.