



VILLAGE
CHURCH
Presbyterian (USA)

We've Come This Far by Faith

SCRIPTURE:
Hebrews 11:1-8

Jan. 14, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

It's an impressive list. These are our ancestors of the faith. These are the men and women upon whose shoulders we stand today. We would not be here were it not for their faith and faithfulness.

The writer starts with Abel. You may remember. The second son of Adam and Eve. The tender of the sheep. He brought a lamb as a sacrifice to God which God liked more because apparently God is a carnivore as opposed to his brother Cain's gift, which was plants from the garden. God liked the vegetables less which made Cain angry so he killed Abel. Not a great start. So Abel is on the list and not Cain, of course.

Then there is Enoch. Great, great, great, great grandson of Adam. He was said to walk with God and is one of three persons in the Bible that did not die but were taken up to heaven alive. The other two? Elijah and Jesus.

Then we go to Noah. Great grandson of Enoch. Famous for building the ark when God was fed up with the evil in the world and wanted a do-over. Remember: God places what symbol in the sky as a promise? Yes. The rainbow—as a promise that God would never again cause destruction to the earth as God did with the great flood.

Then we get to Abraham and Sarah who were called by God to leave their land and to go a place they did not yet know. Imagine that. God speaks to you and tells you to leave your home. Your first question would be? Where shall I go, God? God says to Abraham and Sarah, "Just leave. I'll show you." Then there is Isaac. Jacob. Moses. Gideon. Barak. Samson. Jephthah. David. Samuel. Rahab.

All by faith. All trusting in that which they could not see. Yet believing. By faith. The assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen.

Then there was another in this long list. Robert Harlan Meneilly. He was born on March 5, 1925 in

Mt. Lebanon, a small town in the hills of western Pennsylvania about 7 miles from Pittsburgh.

His dad ran a small grocery store that closed when the Depression hit. Then he became a coal deliverer driving a truck from home to home and business to business. His mother was a homemaker. They were very active in the local Presbyterian church where his father was a ruling elder.

When Robert was 13 years old, he went to a national Presbyterian youth conference and had what he called a conversion experience. He knew that God was calling him to be a Presbyterian minister and he set his life on that trajectory. When he was in high school, he remembers a man came to the church as a guest preacher. He called himself a fundamentalist and railed against evolution. Bob remembers the controversy that followed that man's sermon and he said it seemed strange to him that the church would be caught up in all of this when the message of God is love. That helped to shape his theology for the rest of his life.

He went on to attend Monmouth College, a Presbyterian college in central Illinois—the first in his family to go to college. He had no money so he worked all kinds of jobs, sometimes two and three, from trimming trees to janitorial work to working at the local paper to help pay for college. He finished his undergraduate degree in just under three years. While he was there, his high-school sweetheart, Shirley, came to Monmouth for her degree. The two of them waited tables to pay for their schooling. On the weekends, the college would send out students in gospel teams to small country churches to lead worship. Bob and Shirley volunteered at every opportunity. It helped shape Bob as a preacher and Bible teacher.

When Bob graduated from Monmouth College, he went on to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. While

there, he served as a student pastor at two churches. He was engaged to Shirley who was finishing her degree at Monmouth.

At another conference, Bob and Shirley both heard the call to serve as missionaries to China. The call captured their hearts and they both agreed they wanted to go. But as Bob neared graduation, China turned Communist and was closed to all Christian missionaries. In 1947, the national United Presbyterian Church told Bob there were three possibilities for him. One was a suburban congregation outside of Philadelphia, the other was a new church plant in Prairie Village, Kansas, and the other was a congregation in Hollywood, California. He visited the church in Philadelphia and realized quickly that the church was in the midst of a fight so he did not want to serve there. Then he and Shirley then traveled here to Prairie Village.

They saw this property with nothing on it. The developer, J.C. Nichols, had set it aside for a church. The United Presbyterian Church bought it for \$13,000, which Bob thought to be an astronomical sum at the time. But they saw homes going up all around it. They were charmed and both thought this was the place for their ministry, so they never visited Hollywood. Their home, the manse, owned by the church, was ready in October 1947 so they moved here and for the next 18 months, Bob walked around the neighborhood knocking on doors. And it's true: If he saw diapers hanging on the clothesline, he was especially drawn to the house. He would go up and down, street after street, visiting people.

He would talk to the clerks at grocery stores and waitresses in restaurants. He got to know the milk and bread delivery men and they started talking about this brand, new church with this earnest young minister that was coming to 67th and Mission Road. On Sunday, Feb. 13, 1949, 282 men and women signed the charter as the first members of Village Presbyterian Church. There were 150 children and youth present.

When Bob preached his first official sermon, he preached about three things that the church could expect from his sermons: inspiration, illumination,

and rebuke. I remember I asked Dr. Bob about that and he said maybe it wasn't so much rebuke as it was encouragement to do what was right.

Village Church was adding 60-65 new members every month. Very soon the church had to add another service and that was overflowing, too. So in 1954, just five years after its founding, this Sanctuary was built to accommodate the growth of the congregation which had risen to more than 2,000 members. In five years. 1949-1954.

Shirley Meneilly had her own ministry here at Village. She started the sewing ministry and was a leader in Presbyterian Women among other things. Their children, Rob, Carol and Joy, all grew up here and shared their Dad with this church. Joy served as wedding coordinator and is an important member of the Heritage Committee led by Judy Cooper.¹

By some estimates, Dr. Bob preached more than 2,250 sermons during his 47 years as pastor here. He was known for his creativity—sometimes preaching first-person sermons where he embodied the Apostle Paul or Peter or John Calvin or even Abraham Lincoln. He was known, too, for bringing live animals to the Christmas Eve and Easter services. I asked him why he stopped that and he said he realized at some point that people were paying more attention to the animals than they were to his sermon.

Throughout his ministry, he cared for so many. He was, at his heart, a pastor who loved to be with people. Once when I was visiting with him at Lakeview, he asked who else I had seen while I was there and I told him. He talked about each person with me and then talked about what a privilege it was to be with people in good times and difficult times.

Inspiration, illumination and rebuke. We'll talk more next week about how Dr. Bob and Dr. Bohl and Rev. Tom Are demonstrated remarkable courage during their ministries among us.

Dr. Bob Meneilly retired on Dec. 4, 1994, after 47 years as pastor of Village Church. By estimates, he presided over a church of more than 24,000 people. He married more than 4,300 couples and baptized more than 6,300 children and adults. He died three years ago at age 96.

1 Grateful for "Man of Good Cheer" by Judy Cooper, a paper completed for her Independent Study for her master's degree in theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary; Dec. 16, 1994.

Soon after I arrived here, we named our 99th Street campus to be the Dr. Bob and Shirley Meneilly Center for Mission. It is where our Child and Family Development Center, Food Pantry and Clothes Closet and Computer Ministry are located. It took two years and all of Tom Are's persuasive powers to get Dr. Bob to agree to putting his name there.

At the dedication, Dr. Bob came and spoke. We were in the multi-purpose room of the Child and Family Development Center and I was at the back next to a young couple who no doubt had children there. While Dr. Bob was speaking, I overheard the young man turn to ask his wife, "Who is this guy?" And she said, "I don't know. I think he's from the church." And so I interjected, "Um, you know how this is called the Dr. Bob and Shirley Meneilly Cen-

ter? That's Dr. Bob."

In his penultimate sermon preached here, Dr. Bob said he hoped this pulpit would be remembered not for conflict but for Christ. "Would that this pulpit should be known, now and for all time to come," he said, "for its proclamation of Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord. Every other subject proclaimed here is subordinate to that."

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by faith Abel. By faith Enoch. By faith Noah. By faith Abraham. By faith Dr. Bob Meneilly. By faith Dick Ramsay, founding pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Stanley. By faith you and I are here. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.