

## A Cloud of Witnesses

Hebrews 12:1-2

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I love this beautiful passage from Hebrews: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*

There are two gorgeous images here. There is the race that is set before us, the marathon of Christian living, and there is this great cloud of witnesses that is watching us and cheering us on. I have preached a couple of times here about the race itself, about what lies before us and what it takes to reach the goal. This morning, however, I am thinking about the cloud of witnesses, because this is All Souls Sunday, when we remember our loved ones who have passed on.

We often think of our loved ones watching over us or comforting us after they are gone, don't we? We feel their presence. At funerals I often preach about them looking down on us from heaven, watching over us. Sometimes we talk to our loved ones and hope for their guidance. Especially when a loss is new, you might reach for the phone to call them, to tell them what happened today or to ask for a recipe, and stop your hand just in time. Even decades later, I sometimes still think about what my grandmother would advise me, or I ask my dad how he would handle an issue, and I don't hear their voices exactly, but I know what they would say, because I carry them in my heart. I bet you have had this experience, too. Our loved ones are a gift to us long after their earthly life is past.

In the chapter just before today's scripture, the author of Hebrews doesn't talk about his father or grandparent or other personal loved one. No, he talks about Noah and Abraham and Moses, the ancestors of the faith. So, the image of the great cloud of witnesses in Hebrews goes beyond the personal connection that we recognize and experience with those we have loved and lost. In fact, it is almost a public image. It is like a grandstand filled with witnesses, shouting and cheering as we run past. The witnesses may be people we have known or ancestors we have never met. And they are focused on the race, on the goal that we are striving for. They are cheering for us – not to win, since we are all in this race together – but to finish, to make it to the end, with our eyes still focused on Jesus. They are urging us not to falter, not to give up, but to keep going in good times and bad, until we cross the finish line at last.

On Carol Asher's last day as pastor of this church, the choir sang a beautiful and musically challenging piece titled "Find Us Faithful." It is based on this passage from Hebrews, and I love the way it extends the image of the cloud of witnesses, encompassing not only witnesses from the past but also witnesses from the future. This song is a prayer: "May those who come behind us find us faithful." I am captured by those words.

So, who are the witnesses in our lives? Who are the ones who are cheering us on, even though they are no longer with us in this earthly life? Certainly, they are the ones we carry in our hearts – the ones whose loss still cuts deep, the ones we will name during prayer time today. They are witnesses to our lives, and we care whether they would approve of the choices we make, of the way we run our race. Some of those loved ones helped to form us in faith, and they are cheering us on now. These are the people we remember, the ones who have not forgotten us. May they find us faithful.

Our witnesses also include all those who have gathered in this church to praise God together, who shared coffee and cake and fellowship here over the years, who taught Sunday School here, whose gifts to our invested funds sustain this church today. They are witnesses to our work and worship and to the choices we make about the future of this church. May they find us faithful.

And our witnesses include all the souls who will gather here for worship in years to come, children who will learn about Jesus here, who will play in the meadow many years from now. Our witnesses include the hungry people in our community who will still be fed here, through the soup kitchen or our little pantry or some new program that we haven't thought of yet. Every soul who comes to church here on some future Christmas Eve or Easter, who tentatively enters this building hoping for welcome and a place to rest on a Sunday in May, everyone who finds shelter for their spirit here, or the opportunity to do good work years from now, all these are our witnesses, too. It matters what decisions we make to sustain this church into the future. It matters, because these witnesses matter, to God and to us. May they find us faithful.

The song I mentioned before says this:

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,  
let us run the race not only for the prize,  
but as those who've gone before us,  
let us leave to those behind us,  
the heritage of faithfulness passed on thru Godly lives.  
May all who come behind us find us faithful.

Christian living is a team sport. It is not a solo event. We run this race together. And there is a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on – ancestors we have never met, people who sat in these pews before we were born, those who are dearest to us who have passed away, the children who are growing up here now, the people in our community who depend on us in ways they might not even be able to name, and faithful souls and seekers who years from now will love this sanctuary as much as we do, who will find peace and inspiration here. All of them – ALL of them – are witnesses to how we live, to how we serve, to the legacy we leave in this church, to how we run this race.

May they find us faithful.

Amen