

Meg Lindsay

Sermon: “So Great a Cloud”

The scripture today comes from Hebrews 11, which testifies to the faith of the Israelite ancestors of the Christian faith. While Chapter 11 says that faith is the evidence of things unseen, it gives examples of those who had faith, so that we can see how it looks. It begins with the faith of Abraham and Moses, and we pick up today with the faith of the other Israelite heroes,

Scripture: Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 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.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and 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.

One of my two greatest phobias, or fears, is storms. The other is birds, but that's not important. I think the reason for my fear of storms is that I was in a tornado when I was two, well not so much IN a tornado, but on the way back from Sesame Street Live, we were in a tornado warning and I remember seeing clear lightening in the sky. Then the next week, preschool was cancelled because of the tornado. I was also in a terrifying storm when I was 10, where it seemed like lightening struck the same spot

over and over again, while my family huddled in a friends cluttered basement. Since then I have worried every time a storm comes that there is a chance of a tornado or damage from lightening. When a storm comes in the middle of the night I do what little kids do, hide under my covers so I can't see the lightening, or I look on the TV or online, checking for tornado warnings or severe thunderstorm warnings. When I was younger, I'd start physically shaking from fear, and pray that God would help me survive this horrible storm. When it passed, I'd say a quick prayer of gratitude and fall asleep immediately from exhaustion from worry and fear.

So now to the story of the faithful Israelites, so great a cloud of witnesses...or is it really that great? I thought about entitling this sermon, "Storm cloud of witnesses," to reflect my phobia of storms, as well as the unlikely subjects of the Hebrews list of faithful witnesses. Of course, sermons always end in hope and grace, so I am hoping that leaving the title as "So great a cloud," allows you not to go away with only the storms, but also the hope that goes along with those clouds. Now that I've given away the ending, lets start with the storms.

What stands out to me about this passage is the violence of the selected events chosen to proclaim the faithfulness of the other Israelite heroes. Whether killing Egyptians or people of Jericho, or any of the battles the Judges listed led, they are not exactly light and happy portrayals of God. Then comes the judges mentioned. Gideon was a mostly positive judge, destroying the temple to Baal, but later turning his success into idolatry, Barak was a military leader during Deborah's time as a judge, and he stood by her side and supported her conquering other places in the name of God, Samson, a familiar story, was a man strong enough to rip apart a lion, but who also had a temper

and killed several hundred people, and even more on the day he died, when he forced the building to crumble on him and the philistines around him. Jephthah is the judge whose appearance in Hebrews as a faithful follower probably bothers me the most. A judge and warrior who made a deal with God, saying he'd sacrifice whatever come out of his house first if God allowed him to win a battle, and wound up killing his own daughter because of it. David and Samuel's appearance on the list are understandable, while David certainly had his faults, both he and Samuel faithfully served the Lord through their lives. Hebrews then goes on to mention the Israelite history that most would like to forget, the mocking, the flogging, those who were persecuted and tormented, living in the desert and caves. The people who went before Jesus who suffered or conquered in the name of God and for the sake of God. Not quite a positive history of glory and honor!

But if you think about it, the Christian history isn't much different. The early Church was filled with persecution and martyrdom, but then led to conquering others in the name of God. The Crusades are not the most positive memory of our Christian history, neither are the salem witch trials, the wars fought over the reformation, or even more recently, the KKK, the Westboro baptist church who protests funerals of soldiers and more, or people who hate crimes because they think God ordained them on people who believe something different or look different. I don't want to give you a history lesson, but we don't have the most positive wrap. Sometimes I react to folks like this the same way I do storms, I hide my head under the covers to get away from this train of thought, I go online or watch on TV and constantly look for warnings of some impending storm, something that gives Jesus and Christians a bad name. And I think in the

greater world, those outside of the church who do not get the positive experience and nourishment that we do in this church, many see mostly that. They see a narrow-minded, naive, and judgmental group of people.

You may have read the popular book, *Blue Like Jazz*,¹ by Donald Miller. Donald Miller tells his faith story, and his struggle and his joys with the complexities of faith and Christianity. He attended some classes at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, a notoriously secular college, with only a handful of Christians on campus. For an annual festival on campus, Donald, his friend Tony the Beat Poet, and his other Christian friends decided to set up a confessional booth. This confessional booth was not for the folks who came into the booth to confess, but rather as Tony the beat poet said, “We are going to confess to them. We are going to confess that, as followers of Jesus, we have not been very loving; we have been bitter, and for that we are sorry. We will apologize for the Crusades, we will apologize for televangelists, we will apologize for neglecting the poor and the lonely, we will ask them to forgive us, and we will tell them that in our selfishness, we have misinterpreted Jesus on this campus. We will tell people who come into the booth that Jesus loves them.” So that’s what they did. They dressed as monks, built a booth, and waited for the people to show up. When they showed up, Donald confessed his own sins, his struggles, his selfishness and opened up to people whose view of Christianity was only from the TV, only from street preachers or hateful protesters. The fact that Donald Miller was able to admit that he messed up, that the followers of Jesus mess up quite a bit because they are human, made the students respect Donald and Tony the Beat Poet, and in turn respect the roll of Jesus. In

¹ Miller, Donald, “Confession.” *Blue Like Jazz*. 115-127

response, their ministry on campus expanded to more people and stronger service. The writer of Hebrews is attempting this same thing, by listing people in faiths history who are faithful, but not quite faithful enough. People who are human but make drastic mistakes in the name of God. The author puts this up against Jesus, the perfect, loving, joyful pioneer of our faith.

And thats just it, none of us are perfect, none of us are worthy of the grace and sacrifice of Jesus. We have flawed witnesses to attest to the perfection of Christ. We do have a history of witnesses who are positive, who have changed the world for good in the name of Christ. Christians have been responsible for starting most hospitals around the world, for providing shelter to the homeless, to the widows and orphans. Followers of Jesus are responsible for the abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement, there are followers of Christ who have been instrumental in changing the world, Paul's mission to Europe, St Francis of Assissi's mission to the poor, Luther and Calvin's priesthood of all believers and encouragement of everybody's study of scripture, the early leaders of America, who came here for and later pushed for freedom of religion, Susan B Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who pushed for the women's right to vote, and of course, Martin Luther King, who stood up for the rights of all people in the perfect name of Jesus Christ. We have a great cloud of witnesses alongside the storm of witnesses. And of course we have our own congregation to be our witness.

My personal witnesses have been the church, and that church comes in different forms. It includes Sunday school teachers, youth directors, associate pastors and pastors, campus ministers, professors, family. But it also includes my peers, being on a mission trip with my youth group in 6th grade in Springfield, Missouri, wanting to keep

up with the older kids who were so faithful and worked so hard to serve, it includes my peers at Montreat, when I went by myself in high school for a special program called project burning bush, and was immediately taken in by another youth group, and a small group of others interested in ministry like me. In college my witnesses were my campus ministry, who immediately gave me an opportunity to lead (because I was the only one who knew how to play the guitar), who stood by me after we were in a car accident, my grandfather's death, when I succeed at something or failed at something, they were always there. When I went to Cuba, I saw a new cloud of witnesses, one that was bilingual, diverse, and worshipful, despite not having a church building, but rather the back porch of a house. In Scotland, I saw a cloud of witnesses rooted in tradition, but a youth fellowship ready to move forward, I participated in a cloud of witnesses that were transforming worship, reaching out to others and committed to the children and youth. I saw a diverse cloud of witnesses in the Middle East a couple months ago, the pilgrims to the holy sites from all over the world, for a variety of purposes, but mainly to be in the holy place of our most perfect savior. Most recently I've been a part of the great cloud of witnesses here at Howard Memorial, I've been able to hear stories of your experiences with the church, I've witnessed a transformation of the youth through a week at Montreat and week of mission service, I've seen you visit those in need, I was immediately welcomed to the community with food and a place to stay and your everlasting kindness, and felt your support through Bible studies, presentation, prayer meetings, and worship leadership, and I thank you for that. I know each of you have felt the cloud of witnesses at this church, the support through times of trouble, the love and admiration in times of success, the service of the members and staff over the years to

all those in the Tarboro community. Your witness to Jesus Christ is welcoming and affirming and a blessing to be a part of.

Now this witness is one that must be transformed for the future, a witness for those to come and those we already know to run the race. While our ultimate guide is the perfect Christ, each of us is a witness to that Christ for other people while we run the race of life with Christ as our focus. Now a friend of mine mentioned recently that part of the confusion of a cloud is you can't see where you're going when you're in it. The cloud of witnesses, who each have had so many different experiences with God and different clouds of witnesses in their lives, can pull us in all sorts of directions. Our mom's experience, our pastor's experience, what we see on TV, or what our Sunday school teacher taught us in fourth grade, these all act as part of the cloud, and part of our own experience with God. This is a good thing, because as our faith journey continues we form more mature views of Christ, with Christ as our focus. Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, that is the hope of the message today, while some of it may be a storm cloud, some may be calm, and beautiful and shifting shapes as people come in and out of your life. Well, I may have exhausted the cloud analogy, but I will say this:

Each of you is a witness to Christ's love and grace and perfection, we have that privilege and we have that responsibility. It's a lot to ask, it's not easy as imperfect people, which is why we need each other. We need the witness of our church family, in whatever shape that takes, so that we can continue to glorify God. On the same level we are asked to run the race without any of our weights on us, cast aside all the things weighing us down, the negative history, our unworthiness, and focus on the most

perfect Christ. Come out of your past and look around you at your witnesses to faith, the ones who have guided you and continue to guide you, and may your faith be strengthened by that witness and strength. Now, it's all that easy and its all that hard.

Now, To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen