



CLOUD OF WITNESSES

August 18, 2019, Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

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Can you hear their voices now? “Moses! Moses! Aren’t there graves in Egypt?
Did we have to come here to die? O God! We are all going to die!”

Then Moses shouts, “Do not be afraid! Trust! Stand firm and see the salvation of
the Lord! The Lord will fight for you! You have only to *be still!*”

Can you hear the chariots chasing after you? Horses’ hooves beating the ground.
War cries and chants, dust clouds taking over the land behind us.

Sure, Moses, let’s all sit here and be still, stuck in the mud while an army pursues
us on one side and the river blocks us on the other. Have faith, you say. Trust, you
say.

Then next thing you know Moses outstretches his arms and his staff, and the water
parts. Dry land forms and the Israelites are able to walk to their safety.

Can this be real? Are we going to be safe? And before you know it, the east wind
that had blown is no longer and the dry land that had formed is no longer. The sea
consumes the pursuing army of Egyptians and the Israelites have safe passage once
more.

And do you remember the story of Jericho? Remember the spies on the hill who
looked down on Jericho before they made their entrance? Joshua said to the two
men, “Carefully, quietly, like whispering shadows pass through the land, slip into



the city of Jericho. See its strength and its weakness, then bring your report to me.” And the men melted into the darkness and snuck into Jericho. There they found the walls to be a thick protection all around the city – so thick, in fact, that people lived inside of them, between an inner and outer wall. The walls: They would be a problem.

And then after looking around and being hidden by Rahab they were able to escape safely and report back to Joshua. And that’s when God gave Joshua the plan.

Imagine being one of the watchmen on the wall of Jericho when “one morning, you leaned over the walls to see a strange sight. Israel’s warriors were marching – but not to attack!”

“In perfect order, in dreadful silence, and staring straight ahead, the warriors marched *around the city*. In their midst, the ark of the covenant was carried, and before the ark marched seven priests dressed in white. All at once, the seven priests raised curved rams’ horns to their lips.

All at once, the trumpets blew a chilling sound. Jericho gasped. But the warriors of Israel did not break stride. Marching, marching under the horns of the glory of God, surrounding the ark of his presence, marching, until they had circled the entire city once, then silently marching away again, marching back to their camp – and that was it.

The day was still again. The plains outside the city were empty: footprints, but no feet; memory of the mysterious procession, but no warriors, no priests, no ark visible anymore.”

Can you imagine this? Who were these people? What were they doing? And then they did it again, every day for another six days. If you were one of the Israelites marching, wouldn’t you have been scared that the archers on the wall would shoot you or someone would throw one of their spears at you? Wouldn’t you think Joshua was crazy for leading us in this ridiculous display of pageantry?



But then on the seventh day something different happens. On “the seventh day the Lord had given other instructions to his warriors”, and on that day they circled not once, not twice, but seven times. And on that seventh round, “Joshua threw back his head and called, “Shout! Warriors, shout! For the Lord has given you the city!”

The warriors raised a great shout. They roared. Their voices cracked the air with human cry – and the walls of the city fell down flat. Then every warrior turned his face toward Jericho. Every warrior leaped over the crumbled stone in front of him, entered and fought – and utterly destroyed all in the city except for Rahab and her family. They kept them safe because of her trust and her faith in the Lord Most High that was so strong that she was willing to hide those spies.

These people, every one of these people, are part of the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us in faith.

And Hebrews goes on to mention Gideon and Barak. And of course, you remember Samson. How could you forget Samson and his long hair? And if you think he had faith in God, gosh, his mom had even more faith. Perhaps she should have been in this litany instead of him. Or how about Jephthah and his daughter? It’s a tough one to digest but it’s our story and he and she are both looking down on us. They went before us and they trusted God and had faith in God so much so that she gave up her life for that faith and he gave his daughter up because of his faith, but what have we given up? What have we changed about ourselves, about how we live, because of our faith in God?

“When you look at that list in Hebrews, all these people shared some things in common. Every one of them swam against the current of their time. Every one of them marched to a different drummer. Every one of them lived against the odds. And each one made a difference for the kingdom of God.” [The Right Rev. Michael Curry]



These people, through their 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, and put foreign armies to flight.

Then there were those who were tortured for their belief, for their faith. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³Some were stoned to death, others were sawn in two, many, many, were killed by the sword. Countless people who lived before us, and others who live now, are destitute, persecuted and tormented because of their faith in God.

Believers have wandered in deserts and on mountains, hid in caves and holes in the ground, because of their faith in the God who loves us, the God who calls us His own, and yet all we have to do is go about our daily lives having faith and living faithful lives of discipleship. We don't need to keep quiet, to hide, to feel shame, or be embarrassed about our faith in God but for some reason as a culture we do. We tuck our heads down, and blend in, instead of sticking out, speaking up, living out the faith God calls us to live out.

That is why we have today's text. It is a call to us to remember this great cloud of witnesses so that they can re-build our faith. Re-inspire us. Re-build our courage so that we not only believe in God but do something because of that belief.

Mighty things happen by faith. Worlds change, people find safe passage, walls crumble, and cities are crushed and resurrected...

So what is keeping us back from living out our faith? What are our fears, our sins, and our roadblocks? The author of Hebrews urges us to lay aside every weight that is on our shoulders and the sin that easily distracts us from living up to our full potential. He tells us to let go of everything that weighs us down, burdens us, has us walking around with shoulders hunched and heads down and to run this race of life with perseverance, with courage, with our shoulders back and our heads held high. He tells us to see the type of life that Jesus lived and to live that way



ourselves. To follow our faith in God, to do what God calls us to do in order to make it to the end of our lives as disciples OF Christ, IN Christ, with the countless cloud of witnesses who have gone before us waiting for us in heaven to celebrate with us.

Christ said, “Take my yolk upon you, for my burden is light and my yoke is easy.” What is the heavy load that you’re carrying that you need to give to Christ? What is the thing that you can take from your shoulders and by your trust and faith in Christ can relinquish to him so that you can be set free?

We need to put our faith, our trust, in God so Christ can remove those heavy burdens and we can walk more lightly. Less burdened and more free.

Then as we become more free from our earthly burdens we need to run the heavenly race of faith. To change this world one interaction at a time, one right decision followed by countless other correct and worthy choices. We need to put one foot in front of the other and step-by-step gain speed in our faithful lives until we are running full speed ahead. Full of the Spirit and ready to change the world, to do whatever it is God has called each of us to do. To be brave, to have trust, faith and courage because of our faith in Christ.

The reverend Doctor Charles Reeb said, “Some are running the race of greed, trying to earn as much money as they can. Some are running the race of lust, trying to have as many pleasurable escapades as they can. Some are running the race of power, trying to get the most powerful and prestigious job they can. But at the finish line of these races is death and emptiness. The only race that counts in eternity, the only race that matters after all is said and done, is the race of Christian discipleship.”

He said, “So what are we as Christians racing towards? What is our goal? What is our finish line? It is Jesus. Jesus. Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Jesus, the Prince of peace. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus, the great



shepherd. Jesus, the rock of all ages. Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Jesus!

You see, Jesus is not only our companion and strength as we race. He is our goal. Our goal is to be like Jesus.”

By having faith in Jesus and being like Jesus, we will obtain this better resurrection ourselves. We will live in eternity with Christ and with this great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us.

Author and minister Jill Duffield wrote about this this past week. She said, “because of our loyalty to the Most High God. There may come a time when a choice is demanded [of us]: hide a Jewish family or protect my own, work for justice for the oppressed or enjoy the privileges their suffering affords me, speak up and risk my job, my security, my dearest relationships or remain silent and safe. [Well,] perhaps the time of choosing is upon us...

The Israelites' faith did not create the dry land but it did propel them to walk across it (under the compulsion of the Egyptians pursuing them). There is nothing God doesn't do to set us up for faithful action. The question for us, then, is what will we choose to do by faith?

What will we risk? What words will we speak or refrain from saying? Where will our loyalty be and how will that loyalty be made manifest in the world? Which side of the divide of wealth, opportunity, prosperity or safety will we stand? These are not theoretical questions. Not now. Not ever. Lives are at stake.”

Eternity is at stake.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.