

October 27, 2024

Ezra 3:8-13; Hebrews 12:1-3

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Grounded in Faith: Great Cloud of Witnesses

Last week Rebecca shared the beautiful words from Hebrews chapter 11: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. Rebecca shared that our faith has two dimensions: “Inwardly, we trust in God’s promises, outwardly, we move in response to those promises.”¹ The remaining sections of Hebrews chapter 11 speak to our ancestors in the faith - of Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, of Moses, of Rahab and Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets... a litany of the faithful throughout history. The litany ends with a recognition of those whose names we don’t know; those who suffered and were commended for their faith - who fled their homes, were imprisoned, or were killed. Our scripture this morning is the conclusion of the section of Hebrews on faith. Let us hear these words from Hebrews chapter 12 with the voices of the faithful as our guide: Hebrews 12: 1-3

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 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. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls or lose heart. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

Some days I can literally feel the great cloud of witnesses that surround us. While PCO may only be 60 years old, the faces and voices of those on whose shoulders we stand surround us. Some of it is tangible in the legacy they left for us, as they shared their gifts of time, talent and treasure. And some of it is more than that. It is the relationships that were forged through prayer and study, through worship and work on committees, through serving together to feed the hungry and build homes for those without. It is the exploration of faith and doubt, big questions and small ones shared in youth group, conferences and classes. It is the conversation shared over coffee about the toll that the treatments are taking and knees that are giving way. It is the common bond of raising children together, worries and joys, concerns and celebrations.

This great cloud has weight – it has substance. It is no ethereal wisps of vapor, floating across a placid blue sky. The Greek word used for “cloud” – nephos- is one of two related

¹ Rebecca Mattern. *Grounded in Hope: Faith and Faithfulness*. October 20, 2024. Online at https://www.okemospres.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Sermon_10_20_24.pdf

words for clouds used in the New Testament. Nephos translates to “a great, shapeless collection of vapor obscuring the heavens.”² I can picture it in my mind – a cloud with no limits, stretching infinitely through space and time. As other translators and scholars have noted, this word for cloud – nephos – has been used figuratively to denote throngs of people – a crowd – a packed stadium – think Taylor Swift concerts and football games extending beyond the stadium to packed tailgate parking lots. The author of Hebrews may have had this image in mind – a stadium full people of cheering on the runners finishing a marathon race, when they said “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

The theme of perseverance runs through the Book of Hebrews. This letter – this sermon – was written to a group who was weary, their spirits flagging. They were losing heart. They once had enthusiasm to be followers of Christ, even if that was not the most popular lifestyle in their community. Even if some people thought they were foolish for devotion to a Messiah who died on the cross at the hand of the authorities. They were willing to stand up for those whom others discarded; the refugees fleeing oppression; the ones rejected by their families and neighbors because of who they loved; the ones who were not included because their jobs were not considered respectable or they dressed in their own style. Yes – they once had enthusiasm to be loud and proud supporters of Christ both in word and in action. But now they were tired. And anxious. And afraid. Afraid of the very real consequences of speaking the truth of what it means to follow a Lord and Master, a pioneer and perfecter of the faith who didn't color inside the lines. Maybe it is easier to go with the flow, to succumb to the pressure to be like everyone else; to think about your own security and the security of your family and not worry about others. Maybe there is just too much “stuff” weighing you down that you can't even imagine finishing the race, let alone even completing the next leg.

And into this milieu of muck and fatigue, the author of Hebrews says, “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 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. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls or lose heart.”

We come from a long line, a great tapestry of witnesses who have not lost heart; who have not grown weary in their souls as they followed Jesus into unexpected places. That have run the race with perseverance. The last Sunday in October is the traditional Sunday for marking Reformation Sunday, since on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, the German priest, theologian, hymnwriter (of our first hymn this morning), professor, and Augustinian friar, sent

² Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Accessed through Accordance Bible Software 13.3.2., Oaktree Software, October 2021 update.

his “Disputation of Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences” (later known as the “Ninety-five Theses”) to the local archbishop. It is often said that he nailed these 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church – nailing makes a better story than mailing it. Nonetheless, from this action a movement was sent in place. This movement – really movements of re-formation - spanned a number of countries in Europe, multiple theologians and scholars digging deep in to Biblical scholarship and church history, to urge reforms to the Catholic church seated in Rome. The initial concerns raised by Luther were in reference to “indulgences.” These were payments made to church to secure salvation for yourself and/or loved ones. Luther found this practice theologically indefensible– it didn’t jive at all with scripture’s emphasis on salvation being the act of Christ, not the act of humans. Our salvation is not a transaction, rather we are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone — not any “good works,” financial or otherwise. For Luther that meant “we are embraced by an infinite, eternal and unconditional love.”³

While there was much emphasis on places where the church has strayed theologically during this era, as one scholar notes “the sixteenth-century Reformations in Europe were as much about lived religious experience as they were about doctrinal disputes over salvation: for example, these movements led to widespread translations of the Bible into local, contemporary languages (as opposed to Latin), congregational singing (previously singing was typically done by specialized choirs), and reception of Communion, both bread and wine, by congregations (previously the rite was only a yearly event for many Christians, and included only the bread, not the wine; the weekly Eucharist was typically received only by clergy).⁴ The Reformation movement, which eventually saw a branch of churches split from the Catholic church in Rome, shaped the way we worship as a community – the way we live out our call to be the Body of Christ.

This was not the first time (nor the last time) when a reset helped focus the community on the essentials of the practice of our faith. Rebecca read from the Old Testament book of Ezra about the Hebrew community returning from exile to rebuild the “house of the Lord.” This was more than a capital campaign and a building program. It was the reestablishing of communal worship after the people had been separated from their center of worship for 70 years. So as Rebecca shared, when the builders laid the foundation of the Temple of the Lord, the priests all dressed to the nines, played the trumpets and cymbals and the people gathered sang responsively: “For God is good, God’s steadfast love endures forever.” The passage ends poignantly, with an acknowledgement that there were people both shouting for joy and people weeping, those who remembered the first Temple, the one which had been destroyed by the Babylonian conquest. The author tells us “that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping.” Looking backward as they looked forward.

³ Janz, Denis R. *The Westminster Handbook to Martin Luther*. Westminster John Knox, 2019, p21.

⁴ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2024/10/22/theologians-almanac-for-week-of-october-27-2024>

Looking backward as we look forward. That is what we do as a people of faith. Especially as a people of faith grounded in hope. Grounded in memories. Grounded in memories of those who walked the road before us, with their own met and unmet dreams. There are the familiar names of those whose lives were recounted in scripture: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab. On Reformation Sunday, we acknowledge the words of Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Knox in hymns, prayers, and confessions, that still speak into our hearts 500 years later. There are the saints of PCO on whose shoulder we stand. There are saints in each of our own lives who nurtured our faith. These saints are sitting in the same pew they have always sat in, in some great balcony cheering us on as we run the race set before us. A race that more like a pilgrimage, than a contest.

In his commentary on this passage, Ted Wardlaw, the former President of Austin Theological Seminary, reflects on this audience of saints and the power of the collective memory we share. He says, “Memory is not just a recollection of the past; it is also a way of preparing us for the future... Memory is not just a matter of looking back. Memory is also looking out onto another kind of time altogether, where, through Jesus Christ our Lord, everything that ever was continues not just to be, but to grow and change and look forward, even, to whatever in God’s name is happening next.”⁵

And what is happening next? This is the question we find ourselves stewing in, on, and over on this last Sunday in October, 2024. The days are getting shorter and colder; the bright beautiful trees are shedding their leaves; we are weary and can’t seem to stomach one more political ad, flyer or text. Our spirits are flagging and like that community this book was written to so long ago, we are tired. And anxious. And afraid. Afraid of the very real consequences of speaking the truth of what it means to follow a Lord and Master, a pioneer and perfecter of the faith who challenged the status quo. And into this fog we can’t yet see through, we are called to persevere. To run the race set before us. To hope.

Next Sunday, November 3 is Commitment Sunday. A time when we make an outward sign of our inner faith; a time when we make “grounded in hope” not just a wishful thinking tagline, but a reality. A reality reflecting the power of relationships born and nurtured within a community of faith. A reality that celebrates that we come together, as did those returning from exile, with our tears of sorrow and our shouts of joy. That is what the church is... the place where we support each other so that we don’t grow weary in our souls or lose heart. The church is the place where we can live in the already reality of the presence of a living Savior whose realm knows no end. A great cloud of witnesses stretching back in time and extending into the future. And we can work to make Christ’s realm more of a reality here on earth. We look backward and we look forward grounded in hope and surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

⁵ Theodore J. Wardlaw. Pastoral Perspective. Hebrews 12:1-3. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent*. Ed by: David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor; Westminster John Know Press, 2013. p248