

November 6, 2014

All Saints' Day

*The Cloud*

Hebrews 12:1-3

**Opening words:** We are instructed today from the Epistle to the Hebrews. It was written about the year AD 70. This is what is strange. For over 1200 years, the church considered the Apostle Paul the author of the epistle to the Hebrews. Now, we have our doubts. Several names have been thrown around. No one knows for sure, but one thing remains the same. It is still the word of God. The recipients of the letter were Jewish converts who were familiar with the Old Testament. This is the problem that dominates the entire letter: that generation of Jewish converts is walking away from the faith. If you use your sanctified imagination, you can see this unknown author blocking the exit, begging them to stay. For years, Biblical scholars have been trying to find out why. We don't know why they are leaving, but we know why they should stay: Jesus! Our scripture reading for today is Hebrews 12:1-3. Let me call this message, *The Cloud*.

**Hebrews 12:1-3** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

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On May 13, 609 the church observed a new holiday, All Saints' Day. Pope Boniface IV created it so the martyrs of the church wouldn't be forgotten. It was later moved to the first of November as a reaction to Halloween. The United Methodist Church says anyone who believes is a saint, both the living and the dead. That means you and I are saints. That makes me feel a little uncomfortable. It has become our custom to remember those we have lost on the first Sunday in November. That is today. Between November 1, 2015 and October 31, 2016, we have welcomed seventeen new members, ten by confirmation. Over that same period, we have lost eleven to death. If you know someone who passed this year, say, "**Amen!**"

Just as the story of the widow's mite and the healing of the ten lepers have become the traditional scriptures for the annual stewardship message and Thanksgiving, the twelfth chapter of Hebrews is the traditional scripture for All Saints' Day. You know the text. It was just read to you. As I said to you in the opening words, this unknown author is trying to discourage ancient Jews from leaving the faith. By the twelfth chapter, the unknown author gets personal. He reminds them of their lost loved ones who have died in the faith. If you walk away from the faith, then you are walking away from them as well. How can you walk away from them? It is at this point that this unknown author comes up with a with a brilliant visual, the cloud of witnesses. Ask any meteorologist and

they will tell you. A cloud is nothing more than countless numbers of water droplets; so it is with the cloud of witnesses. Each one is encouraging us to remain in the faith. From their eternal perspective, they know the truth. The only thing that matters in life is Jesus. If you walk away from the faith, then you don't just walk away from church. You walk away from Jesus. Where does one go if you walk away from Jesus? This is the answer: You go nowhere! If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" I have been trying to answer this question all week:

How many saints do you think are in the cloud? The number must be astronomical. I have no clue how many have died in the faith in the past 2,000 years. I have no clue how many have died since the beginning of time. The cloud must be so dense that it is impossible to see individuals at first glance. It's like trying to find a familiar face from an aerial shot of Times Square on New Year's Eve. It is impossible. There are just too many. It is only when you pull the camera closer that you begin to recognize individual faces. We celebrate when we see someone we know. However, it is not just about recognizing someone. It is also about receiving their communication. What are they trying to communicate to us? Each one in the multitude is encouraging you to remain in the faith and to live your life for Jesus. From their eternal perspective, nothing else matters. Just think about it for a moment.

Some have been in the cloud a long time. They are the martyrs found in the Bible and the early church. In that list is Stephen. You remember him. He was full of potential but was stoned to death by an ugly mob. Also stoned to death was James, Jesus's half-brother. James, the son of Zebedee, was executed by a sword. Peter was crucified upside down at his own request - unworthy to die in the same way as Jesus. Later came the long list of early church martyrs. Do these names sound familiar? Justin Martyr, Polycarp, St. Felicia, St. Sebastian and St. Alban. That list is far from complete. You know the truth. The list of martyrs continues to grow. After more than 2,000 years, people are still willing to die for Jesus. That list of endless martyrs is in the cloud. They are encouraging you to remain in the faith and to live for Jesus!

Some in the cloud are historical giants. They changed the church to make it relevant. Do you know these names? There is John Wycliffe, who translated the Bible into Latin. It doesn't sound like much now, but it was a step in the right direction. There is John Hus. He was burned at the stake for altering the doctrine of the established church. There is Martin Luther, who became the poster boy for the Protestant Reformation. He translated the Bible into the common tongue. There is John Calvin. He had a very high view of God. There is John Wesley, who had a high view of man. He believed God trusted you enough to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. There is John Knox, who founded the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. There is George Whitfield. He may have been the greatest preacher this world has ever known. They are all in the cloud and are encouraging you to remain in the faith and live for Jesus!

Some in the cloud you only know by name. They left this world before you entered the world. In January of 1950, my paternal grandmother did what she always did on Sunday. She went to church, taught Sunday School and cooked her family lunch. Unfortunately,

that meal was never served. She died of a fatal heart attack in front her stove. That was 1950. I was born in 1957. I never met her. When I get to heaven, I'm going to talk to her for the first time. Do you have anyone in your life who you will meet for the first time in heaven? They may have never held you as a baby, but they are lifting you up in prayer today. They are part of the cloud who are encouraging you to remain in the faith and live for Jesus!

Some in the cloud you only know by a faint memory. You remember them as advanced in age, when you were a child. My Aunt Nelma was my grandmother's sister. She lived in Cleveland and we only saw her during the holidays. Can I be honest with you? She intimidated me. She had a lifelong friend and roommate named Ruth, who knew Cleveland like the back of her hand. Those were innocent times. We never questioned their relationship. They died when I was young. Do you have any relatives who passed when you were young? They are part of the cloud who is encouraging you to remain in the faith and live for Jesus!

Some in the cloud you knew well. They were part of your daily life. You talked regularly. You sought out their advice and wisdom. You tolerated each other and were a real team. You assumed they would always be there, but you were wrong. They died. Your life has never been the same, but you adjusted. When you get to heaven, they are the first ones you want to see. Here is the good news. They are part of the cloud. They are encouraging you to remain in the faith and live for Jesus! This is the last one:

Some in the cloud are newcomers. They are the hardest ones. The wound of grieving is still fresh. We are still trying to live our lives without them. My prayers do not go out to them. Their burdens and worries in this world are gone. My prayers go out to those of you who are trying to live the rest of your lives without them.

May we never forget:

Virginia Coates  
Lester Cramer  
Marge Dilts  
Jim Harmon  
Wilda Himes  
Jean Hudock  
Robin Parry  
Ron Pentz  
Jim Petrella  
Jack Payne  
Ruth Sabanick  
John Toth

Each one is part of this great cloud of witnesses. They now see what is truly important in life. If they could tell us one thing, it would be this, remain in the faith and live for Jesus! The only thing that matters is Jesus!

Will you pray with me?