

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 14, 2022

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 the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong 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 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.

Beloved, the grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our Lord endures forever.
Amen.

There are some beautiful lines in this text. One that I hope, at least in parts, is familiar to you. You can skip over the psalm into part of the middle of that text. A couple others, the beginning, and the end, are really significant for us. We're going to spend most of our exploration this day, actually, at the beginning of chapter 12. Before we get there, I was with a friend on the evening stroll not too long ago, and I spent my entire life in the in the south, so I've known about cicadas my whole life. I've been terrified by them. When I've found one in the middle of the night, I've been confused. When i found the exoskeletons on the ground. I know that sound. We were walking, and I had never thought about the sound too, but it was so loud that evening. It was a humid night, and the cicada song was just kind of overwhelming, so much so that we had to kind of speak up in order to hear ourselves talk. My friend stopped me and they said, Do you know why they sing like that?"

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In 41 years of life, I had never asked that question.

My friends said “They sing like that to protect themselves. See, when the sound is so loud and all-encompassing, you don't actually know where they are located.” Maybe many of y'all probably know this. I didn't. The sound that night was all encompassing, and so I kind of just made my way looking around thinking” Yeah, I couldn't find one and point to it if i needed to.”

I went home and did a little bit of research. My friend was right. They do sing to protect themselves. That's one of the reasons. They also sing to let their brother and sister and friends' cicadas know that they are there too, to let them know that they are not alone in the darkness of the night. So, their song is for protection, but it's also for a reassurance to their neighbors. They sing also to attract a mate, to express love one to another, and they also sing for protection.

For the human ear telling precisely where a cicada song originates is often difficult. The pitch is nearly constant. The sound is continuous to our ear, and they sing in scattered groups. What's interesting to me about these songbirds of a different kind that we hear in the evening, is, that as they sing for protection, they are actually binding themselves one to another in their vulnerability. They know that if they are to sing just one at a time, those would wish them ill would be able to find them, locate them, and take care of them.

In their vulnerability, they lift their voices together, and something all-encompassing happens. It's an important lesson for us as we explore this morning's passage because the author of Hebrews has this beautiful phrase to describe God's people. It's a phrase that I hope you are familiar with, perhaps from All Saints Sunday, which we will celebrate the beginning of November together. The author says this after all the acclamations of affirmations of faith in the previous chapter, the author says, “Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”

It's a beautiful image, “ a great cloud of witnesses.”

“Let us 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.”

The author is writing to these people, and he wants them to have a good image to take with them. This image is the great cloud of witnesses. The idea is that as the people of God, we are not singular in our voice or in our presence. Indeed, whether we can see them or not, there is a great cloud of spirit and flesh around us.

It is a chorus that envelops us.

It lets us know that there are others out there. It helps us to understand and express love. It lets us know that we are protected.

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It lets us know that we are not on this journey alone. That image the great cloud of witnesses is going to be really important for the Church, those people trying to be faithful in the midst of a new season, They are going to need to know that when they commit to a new way of life, they are not doing so alone, but there are other people walking alongside them. You know, we have a ministry fair out here in TK Young. There are countless different ways that you can get involved in the life of the church, but what you'll find as you go to each of those tables is that there are already people there waiting for you to tell you about the ministry that is happening, and to tell you why it's significant in their lives, and why it's making an impact in our church and in the world. You are not compelled to engage in ministry. You are invited. We are not asking you to sing a solo. We are asking you to join a great choir.

Here's the interesting part, though, for those who are reading this letter. The author says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," and here's the key part, "let us lay aside every weight."

It's interesting when we move into a new season in life, or in faith together, we often imagine that we are supposed to carry everything with us into that new season. All of our history, all of our knowledge, all of our experience. We're supposed to pick it up and carry it with us. Also, all of our disappointments, all of our worries, all of our anxiety, but the author here said,

"Be encouraged by the people who are around you, who are walking this journey with you. Lay aside every weight." Here's the thing. You cannot run the race that is laid out before you if you are weighed down by the old things.

If you are clinging to something from the past, you will not be able to move forward in the ways that God is calling you. That's true in church, and in faith. It's also true in our personal lives, and it's true at work, and it's true in marriage, and it's true in friendship.

It is one thing for us to know that we are surrounded by many people on the same journey, but it's another thing for us to hear the voice of God telling us to put down that old thing, that heavy thing, that weighty thing. You can't run like I want you to run when you're carrying that. That's not how this race was laid out for you. What's interesting is many of us will say that we want the new thing, the beautiful thing, the life-giving thing, but we don't want to loosen our grip on the old thing. There isn't room in our hands for the new thing if we're still clinging to the old.

This example of faith was supposed to inspire the Hebrew people, the readers of the Hebrews. It was intended to inspire and reassure them on their journey of faith. It was also supposed to challenge them because they were supposed to be a new example of the countless times that God has provided in the past. That's why we get this run up to verse 29 of in faith Abel, in faith Noah, in faith Abraham, in faith Sarah, in faith Moses, and then in faith them.

God had a plan for the people who were reading this text not to do the work of God on their own, but to do so with a great cloud of witnesses to inspire them and encourage them in their lives of faith. The truth is God was in love with their future and where they were going. What God had in

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store for them. God knew there was new life, and there would be challenges, and that it would be difficult, and there would be disappointments. We know all that. That's a given. There is also something brand new, something they couldn't yet imagine. Something that would make them want to throw that heavy weight behind them and run on to something brand new. Something so good that they wouldn't allow anything to deter them from reaching their goal.

Then there's this pointing by the author to the example of Jesus Christ. "Look to the pioneer and perfecter of the faith," he tells the people reading Hebrews. Look to Christ who endured the cross, and the weight of its shame. What did he do with that weight? He disregarded it. He put it aside. He left the shame for someone else to worry about because he knew that God was calling and bringing about a greater story, a greater glory, a more faithful purpose, and inspired future.

I had a friend sent me an NPR podcast earlier this week. It is from several years ago. For me, this last couple weeks has been about learning things that have been in plain sight the whole time, and I just haven't stopped or haven't thought to examine them a little bit more. It starts with some bugs at night, and it ends with this song that you've heard in this sanctuary. Steve Berger was here earlier today. Steve, are you in here right now? Yeah. Thank you. So, last year he was he was singing this to our kiddos. "This Little Light of Mine" is one that we also sang this morning. You probably know some of its history. I didn't. For me it was a song that I like. No offense, Steve, but it was never something that really compelled me. I was listening to this podcast this week,

and listening to the voice of Rutha Mae Harris in Albany, Georgia sing as part of the freedom singers and speak to a crowd that had gathered to learn about the struggle for civil rights in that south Georgia town. She sang "This Little Light of Mine." She sang it loud in the recording, and it was a bolder proclamation than I had ever heard before, She told the story of how, during the civil rights movement in Albany, they would sing that song. They would sing that song, and countless other songs. They would join together as they were marching, and right before they marched, in order to encourage each other with song, to realize that they weren't marching alone. They weren't in the struggle alone, and that what they were going to birth into the world they weren't even going to enjoy alone. They were going to enjoy it as a community, a great cloud of witnesses, you might say. Rutha Mae Harris says that song would help steady the nerves of the crowd. She said it kept me from being afraid in their vulnerability. They were bound together in the work of bringing about justice, and that song took on a life of its own in the civil rights movement. Then later, just a few years ago in Charlottesville, when white supremacists marched and screamed slurs at those who had gathered who claimed that they would not be replaced, Reverend Seku, who was leading a counter protest to those white supremacists. The plan was to remain silent, he said. The plan was to remain silent as they walked past and yelled and screamed, and yet, as they began to do that. he said silence isn't what was needed at the time. In his tradition, which is Pentecostal, they talk often about changing the atmosphere. So, how do we change the air around us? How do we change the spirit of that is surrounding us in a given moment? So, he began to sing "This Little Light Of Mine," and he said it shook the white supremacists. They didn't know what to do with that kind of joy. We weren't going to let the darkness that they brought have the last word. So, they began to sing and the recording you can

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hear the jeers coming back at them, but they stood in a quiet and resolved voice. One voice, as a great cloud of witnesses, singing about light, and singing about his power over darkness.

As it was for the great cloud of witnesses, so it was with Christ, and for the people who read Hebrews. So, it is for you, and so it is for me, and so it is for our church this day. On this kickoff Sunday, God wants us to hear a message. The message is that we have been given this community of people, this great cloud of witnesses, this celestial chorus, so that we might be surrounded, enveloped, encouraged, inspired, and reassured that God is at work in our lives and in the life of Idlewild Presbyterian Church. Just as God was at work in Abel and Noah and Sarah and Abraham and Moses and Rahab and Gideon and Barack and Samson and David and in Samuel. Just as God was at work in them shaping their faith and their future, so God is at work in you and at work in our church. So, here's my hope for you this day as you walk out from this place back into your family lives, back into your places of work, back into your places of volunteering. As you go, imagine where God is calling you to engage in ministry in the year ahead in TK Young. I hope that you'll be quiet for just a moment instead of raising your voices to try to overwhelm the chorus around you, the hum.

I hope that you'll be quiet and listen through the laughter, and the joy, through the conversation and, perhaps, even the song, and you'll know that you are not alone in this journey.

Wherever you are, that there is a great cloud of witnesses. A great cloud that was here before creation, that has been birthed into creation, and is surrounding you even now. It's a great cloud of people meant to let you know that you are not alone, meant to let you know that, in vulnerability, we are bound together, and we are kept safe. It is meant to inspire you to go beyond what you know, into something brand new. My encouragement for you is that you might lay aside the weight that you are carrying this day, be it grief or expectation or disappointment or heartbreak, and that we might together live in such a way that many years from now, our ancestors of the faith might say by faith, the people that God saw fit to bring to Idlewild Presbyterian Church in 2022 looked to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of their faith. They learned in that time what it meant to be faithful, and, by faith, they recommitted themselves to study, fellowship, to worship, and to wonder. By faith they were courageous in their calling, laying aside every weight, to live into the future that only God could imagine. Beloved, here's the truth. God is in love with your future, and God is in love with the future of Idlewild Presbyterian Church. Let us live by faith and be encouraged by the chorus that surrounds us. May it be so this day and every day. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of us all. Amen.