

Psalm 8 - Hebrews 11:1-3; 12:1-3

The book we call “the letter to the Hebrews” is really a sermon, most likely preached in the last part of the first century, when the new Christians began to wonder why Jesus hadn’t come back to rescue them from the persecutions they endured. By naming the faithful of long ago, the first century preacher calls his congregation to join those long-ago saints in continuing their journey of faith. Hear his definition of faith:

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³ 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.

For the rest of chapter 11, the preacher recites for the congregation their salvation history: first, those whom God called “righteous”; then, those who obeyed God and journeyed to unknown lands; and lastly, those who suffered persecutions—all whose lives testified to God’s faithfulness to them and to God’s works in the world. Then he continues in chapter 12, *12 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, ² 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.*

This is the message of the Lord. **We give thanks to God.**

By Faith

One of the delightful things about growing up in a small town is that, wherever you go, “everybody knows your name.” It’s reassuring to have extra caring eyes and hearts looking out for children who hang out at the library or park, and for adults who need a helping hand.

It certainly was reassuring for my parents, for, as a child growing up in New Bern, anywhere I went in town—and I could easily ride my bike from one end of town to the other—there were people who knew me. My parents had faith that, if I skinned my knee, someone would help. If I misbehaved, word would get back to my parents or grandparents before I got home. While I wasn’t so enamored with all those eyes around when I was a teenager, the older I get, the more I appreciate people who make it their business—not to be snoopy, but to encourage and look out for others: a *cloud of witnesses* who watch, and watch over, other folks.

We need that cloud of witnesses, don’t we, when there’s danger from forces both *seen and unseen*: from cars hurtling down the street to disease epidemics, from irrational people to economic instability, to the very real presence of evil in the world which we saw so vividly when nine faithful Christians, studying God’s word at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, were murdered. If we’re realistic, we know our journey through life, despite its many joys, is also fraught with dangers: physical dangers like the perilous journeys that long-ago pilgrims made to holy places, and like those the early European settlers of America made, crossing the stormy Atlantic, in search of religious and political freedom; and the spiritual dangers of letting the sorrows or evil we experience draw us away from God.

What kept them going? What will keep us going through sorrow and sickness and disappointments?

Faith, first and foremost: *the assurance of things hoped for—the conviction of things unseen*, or, as another translation (Clarence Jordan) has it: *the turning of dreams into deeds* (that is, turning God's dreams into present reality by our deeds)—and *betting your life on the unseen realities*.

We have faith. Our inward, unseen reality is that, by faith, we can trust God's promises for peace, justice, mercy, salvation. Now, faith doesn't prevent adversity. Nor does it ensure that we will always do right by God, or by others. Still, faith is essential to living in harmony with God's dream for the world. Faith is the foundation for the peace and the courage to go on, even when the world seems to be falling apart around us. It is a precious gift from God, just as an athlete's inborn physical attributes are gifts from God—not something we create in and for ourselves. And like the athlete's physical gifts, our faith will do us little good unless we consciously train and grow and persevere in whatever God calls us to do.

You're well acquainted with the training regimen of faith: frequent prayer—both talking to God and listening for God; the study of God's word for our lives; worship with the body of Christ; following Jesus into the places he went, to heal and feed and forgive—thereby turning God's dreams into God's reality of the kingdom fulfilled here on earth—the outward reality.

That dream was on the horizon for our spiritual ancestors, beckoning them on. The other thing besides faith that kept them going is the hope that grew each time they remembered that *great cloud of witnesses*: those spiritual ancestors from times past—and those of people known to them in the present— whose lives testify to God's hand at work in them.

Scripture tells us faith isn't only an individual matter—it's even more about the community of faith, past and present and future: Abraham, journeying with his extended family and others who joined them along the way; Moses, herding his motley crew through the Sinai wilderness; Jesus, teaching his disciples as they traveled through Galilee toward Jerusalem; Paul, seldom without companions as he established communities of faith along the rim of the Mediterranean Sea.

This community of the faithful—this cloud of witnesses—supported, encouraged, argued with, prayed for, cared for one another, and were bound together by their love for God and God's faithfulness to them. And since Jesus has come, Christians try to follow his path of loving God through the love of neighbor—love demonstrated in action: *turning God's dreams into our deeds*. The congregation of Mother Emanuel is doing just that by forgiving the murderer of their friends, even as they are sunk deep in grief. A Greensboro pastor, Amos Quick, took his daughters to Charleston the weekend after the murders to join the throngs of mourners from Charleston and all over the nation. When the Rev. Quick returned, he testified, “this church may have lost its pastor, but they still have their God”—a powerful reminder that God will always sustain us, no matter how dire our circumstances.

I am also struck at Emanuel's sense of unity—of pulling together. At our best, we church folk are good at doing that. We know the community of faith—the church—isn't perfect, because we, its people, aren't perfect. But we keep on trying, along with others who also seek to follow Jesus, to witness to his good news for the world. What we do by our witness is the outward reality of faith—faith in action. It's a message desperately needed by the world today.

The cloud of witnesses isn't limited to Biblical times. Consider your pantheon of pastors—and trust that, just as God was with you in bringing the right pastor for the right time in the past, so God is with you in this time, to hold you strong as you move forward, by faith, in hope.

Look around you now at this room full of links in the great chain of witnesses. See those who, by faith, taught you or your child in Sunday School—those who, by faith, make a point to welcome you to church—send a card or bring food when you're sick—sit and cry with you when you grieve—encourage you when you're down on yourself. You are a cloud of witnesses who show up every week, by faith and in hope that God will prepare you to be wiser and stronger witnesses for others, day by day. In Christ's name, you shore each other up when someone falters; model Godly ways to live; help bring out the best in others; practice forgiveness; pray for the concerns of this congregation and for the world. The church is God's people past present and future, together, planting seeds of hope, and witnessing to the great good news of Christ by the way we live our faith--together.

By faith, in hope, we look back, to learn from our past;
By faith, in hope, we look forward and move forward, to where Christ leads us;
By faith, in hope, we persist through discouragement and failure;
By faith, in hope, we are brave, despite our fears;
By faith, in hope, we serve our Lord Jesus wherever we are.

Thanks be to God!