

“Surrounded by a Great Cloud of Witnesses”

Deuteronomy 30 and Hebrews 12

November 1, 2020

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

For the past month we have been considering the story of the exodus of the people of Israel as they have fled the slavery they endured in Egypt and journeyed to the Promised Land to which God would guide them. They are now camped on the outskirts of the Land of Canaan, about to cross over from the wilderness to that land of promise. Moses recognizes that he has brought them as far as he will go; his leadership is coming to an end and Joshua will pick up that mantle of leadership after him. Moses sees the Promised Land in a distance but he will die before arriving there. The book of Deuteronomy is his closing sermon to the people he has served for a generation. Let's listen to Moses' parting words:

Prayer for Understanding

In your Word, Holy God, show us an image of who you would have us to be. By your Spirit, show us truth and through Jesus Christ, the Living Word, may we broaden our understanding of who you are. Amen.

Read Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

I saw this cartoon this week. The picture is of the living room of a house – pre-pandemic era. Standing on the inside of the front door is a woman, about middle aged. She has apparently responded to the door bell and opened the front door. The visitors are two men, dressed in nice black slacks and white button shirts. Their hair is short and

nicely combed. Nice looking young men. In each man's hand is a Bible. Upon opening the door, the men quickly identify themselves and the church with which they are affiliated and then they ask: "Have you found Jesus?" To which the woman quickly replies: "I'm Presbyterian. We never lost him."

Today we celebrate All Saints Day; in the Protestant Church we commemorate Reformation Sunday and All Saints Day together. It is a day to remember and give thanks for all those men and women who have gone before us, the saints, who have witnessed to the love and grace of Jesus Christ in their particular contexts. The saints were people who never lost Jesus no matter what the circumstances through which they were living. They were people who when asked whom will they serve, always answered, "We serve Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ and the God he came to reveal to us." They were people who have modeled for us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The saints were keepers of the faith; stewards of the gospel. Today we are also stewards of the gospel. We have been entrusted with sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, his love and his forgiveness, with our family and friends, with this community and to the ends of the earth. And we are surrounded by that cloud of witnesses who have gone before us.

This morning's New Testament scripture reading is from the Letter to the Hebrews. The letter is attributed to the Apostle Paul. It is believed to have been written to Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem. The purpose of the letter is to encourage Christians to persevere in the face of persecution.

Read Hebrews 11: 1-3 and 12: 1-2, 12-13

"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 is made from things that are not visible.”

Who were these saints/ancestors? The writer reviews a list of who the saints have been in the past. It’s like he is flipping through a photo album and reminding us of each person in our faith family.

Here’s the picture of Father Abraham, who obeyed God’s call to set out for a place that God was giving him as an inheritance, even though he did not know where the journey would take him.

This picture is of Moses, who by faith led the people out of Egypt and helped them survive the wilderness by trusting God to provide the necessities of life as they journeyed through the wilderness.

This picture is of Rahab, a prostitute, who risked her life by showing hospitality to the Israelite strangers. And by showing hospitality and providing aide, the story of Israel could move forward into the Promised Land. Rahab will actually become the great great grandmother of King David.

And there are many more – saints who died in faith, seeking God’s kingdom not only here on earth but God’s kingdom in heaven.

Actually, the main body of Hebrews is not a letter at all, but bears all the marks of an early Christian sermon. The preacher, probably a well-educated Jewish Christian, addresses a congregation of folks who are exhausted. They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired of the world’s chaos (maybe trying to survive a pandemic or political upheaval) – so tired that their hands are drooping and their knees are so weak that they may give out on them,

preventing them from standing, much less walking or running the Christian race. They are losing confidence and they are worn out and worn down.

“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 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. Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.” What? This preacher is asking way too much of us; we are exhausted just trying to keep it together.

True participation in the Christian faith always carries a price. Sometimes the cost is financial. There are jobs Christians will not do, deals they will not make, promotions they will not get, conspiracies they will not join. Sometimes the cost is social. Families have been known to disown converts or family members become at odds with one another over differing theological views. Jesus reminded his followers that the cost of discipleship may pit children against parents and siblings will fight with one another. My family has experienced that religious conflict! The cost can be political. There are powers which Christians will not exercise, self-serving and abusive lords we will not serve if we remain true to Jesus Christ. Remember that the Israelites escaped such a self-serving, abusive lord. Christian commitment carries a price tag. And there are times when it begins to seem futile to pay the cost when nothing changes, when the problems seem unfixable and the powers-that-be are too strong. So, it is understandable that we, as Christians, grow weary.

The preacher of Hebrews, as Moses did before him, puts before the congregation the choices which are before the people. The Hebrew preacher tries to rouse his congregation with the exciting picture of a footrace. Banners are flying, the stadium is filled with spectators, and the members of the congregation are urged to respond like trained athletes. But now the preacher puts forth a different image – a Christian runner with a limp. Dr. Tom Long says in his commentary on this passage that many major cities host annual marathons. “At the head of the pack are the world class marathoners. Lean and speedy, they race through the course with astonishing swiftness. At the rear of the throng, however, the picture is quite different. There we find the ordinary runners, a few more years under the belt perhaps, a little extra weight over the belt, a lot more pausing to sip water and to catch one’s breath. There are also the contestants on crutches and in wheelchairs, courageously out on the course none-the-less. Sometimes one of the runners near the back will grow weak from the heat or faint from exhaustion. When this happens, other runners will stop to help out, compassion being more important than competition in the rear of the marathon. The preacher now wants his congregation to know that the great race of the Christian life is often more like the back of the marathon than like the front.” That great cloud of witnesses which surrounds us, not only from the past, but in the present, will help us to lift our drooping hands and strengthen our weak knees. Each and every one of us is here at this time in this place for a reason – God has called us here. And not only has God called us here to share who we are and what we have, but God has given us each other. And we can help each other run this race – equipping the saints, strengthening the weak knees.

Stewards of the gospel; people who have never lost Jesus.

A monastery which had fallen on hard times. Once a great order, its was now a dying order after suffering from persecution and the rise of secularism. The abbot of the monastery discovered a Jewish rabbi living in a hut in the woods adjacent to the monastery. It became the abbot's habit to visit the old rabbi and pour out his concern for his dying monastery. Months pass and finally the old rabbi offers his friend this advice: "When you return to the monastery, tell the monks that Jesus Christ is living among them. Only those words – no other explanation." After returning to the monastery and calling the monks together, the abbot repeats what the rabbi instructed him to say. "Jesus Christ is living among us." As the days and weeks and month followed the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was truth to what they had been told. Was Jesus Christ living among them? Where and which one of them was the Christ? As they contemplated this possibility, they began to treat each other with extraordinary respect and everything seemed new and possible. The townspeople visited the monastery began to notice something different. The very air seemed charged with new energy and the monks were treating each other with renewed love. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought friends. And so it was that the monastery once again became a thriving order.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, saints from the past and in the present. Jesus Christ is living among us, shining through each one of us. And, in faith, we know that with God all things are possible and the future lies before us with new possibility. I pray that you will consider how God is calling you to engage in the ministry of Jesus Christ here in this place at this time.