

Joining the Cloud
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
August 19, 2007
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As you know, this past week was Vacation Bible School here at SPSA. When I read through the Scripture from Hebrews, I got so excited because these are some of the great Bible stories we were learning with the kids. My main contribution to VBS this year was “Wild Bible Adventures.” I started the week as Rahab, sneaking the kids to my roof top in Jericho with some spies from the Israelites, showing that I believed in the same one, true God that they did. On Wednesday some of the kids made a wall while the rest of us marched around the city of Jericho waiting for the horns of the priests to signal the crumbling of those walls. These stories came alive for me with the kids as they most certainly were alive in as the writer of Hebrews recounted them in this epistle. As he writes, these ancestors of ours did what they did through faith. Moses and the Israelites passing through the Red Sea on dry land; the walls of Jericho crumbling; Rahab, a prostitute whose name gets remembered with honor because she went against the people of her own city through faith in the God of the people who were surrounding its walls. Faith inspires some incredible activity. The author alludes of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets – all people who through their faith, faced a world that is far from how God wants it to be and worked to bridge that distance.

The letter begins with the statement, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (v. 1&2a). God speaks through people who are faithful and faithful Christians must respond. This is the theme of our passage today. How many of you remember being asked what you wanted to be when you grew up? How many of you still think of what

you'd like to do with you grow up? In no uncertain terms, this letter to Hebrews, written probably sometime between the year 70 and 90, tells us that we have an amazing assortment of faithful people who we should want to be like when we grow up. The interesting part is that most people don't think they want to be like Rahab, a prostitute. Or like the prophets who struggled with God and were sometimes very unwilling conveyers of God's messages. We don't think of wanting to be like Samson, who we know had a weak conscience or like Gideon who was timid in the face of needed action. One of the things we know with certainty through the teachings of Christ, and from all these examples, is that God turns things upside down. Prostitutes gain places of honor, men with weak consciences and timidity lead God's people, prophets speak words that show us truth thousands of years later. But we are conditioned by society not to value the thing that God values – namely faith that is action and inspires us to do God's work – but to value things like money, celebrities, expensive clothing or jewelry or apartments, jobs high on the corporate ladder. The people Hebrews shows us to look up to are those who know the kind of world they live in and seek to do God's work in it. They don't have any false assumptions that it is a perfect world or that the problems of the worlds do not affect them. Like us, they live in their time, deal with the problems of that time, and still seek to be active in the way God would use them at that time. This is faith. Faith not as a statement of belief but of action within the world on behalf of a God who created and loves the world. When I grow up, I want to be like that.

Thomas Groome, a theologian and professor, conceives of time in a very different way than the linear time we usually think of. Without the past, “our present is impoverished and our future diminished” (*Christian Religious Education*, p. 7). But we

can't think of the past as just being what we need to convey in the present and be sure to remember in the future. The present is only time that really exists for us. Don't we have new things to contribute? New situations that arise that we respond to faithfully? But if we do so without regard for the future that comes next, we will find ourselves without a future to come to. Groome writes that instead of thinking of time as a linear progression from the past to the present to the future, we should think of ourselves as pilgrims on a journey between two eternities. Obviously this is a complicated thought, and it also fits perfectly with what the writer of Hebrews is trying to get us to understand. Groome writes, "We are a pilgrim people in time, coming down through history, moving ever forward toward our 'end time.' Along the way we develop and devise ways of being in time, with systems and artifacts to support us in being together...There is a pilgrimage only because there are pilgrims" (*CRE*, p. 14). We inherit from our ancestors, we contribute to the path and the other journeyers, and we move toward a future we won't be around to witness. Our God is a god without beginning and without end. We experience the kingdom of God that has already come in Jesus Christ and is yet to be fully realized. We are entrusted with the present to live in a way of love, respect, and justice to make the place we're in together the best we can – not only for ourselves but in honor of those who have gone before us and of those who are yet to come. Our time is much more complicated and much more beautiful because of our faith. We are at once part of the past, present, and future. And we are not alone.

The writer 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" (12:1). Because our

faithful ancestors show us how to respond in life the way God wants us to, because God sent Jesus to show us how to be human in a new way and in relationship with God in a new way, because we are pilgrims on a journey inherited by these ancestors, we must contribute to the world in a positive and faithful way now. And we must help build the kingdom of God that will only be fully realized in the future.

As we evaluate our own lives, we know that there are pilgrims on this journey with us who are part of the cloud of witnesses we are asked to join by this inspirational letter. Who are they? We can look into the past some more, at pilgrims who have gone on this journey before us – at Mother Theresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr.; we can look to our ancestors in the Methodist Church, to John and Charles Wesley and Francis Asbury; we can look at faithful people now responding to unjust situations in our country and world – like Christian peacemakers in the Middle East and Darfur, like the people of UMCOR who respond to disaster man-made and natural. We can look at pilgrims on this journey with us whose promise is just ahead of us – like the children of Vacation Bible School who spent this week learning, singing, praising, playing, doing community service, and forming a community between the divides of language and class. I think the kids who showed me their present place in the cloud of witnesses and their promise for a future of that cloud. One of my favorite days was when we talked about those walls of Jericho crumbling. The kids shared with me and their new friends things in their life that had been hard. They share about divorced parents, sick grandparents, the death of pets, the fear of going to school for the first time and not knowing anyone. I wrote their hardships on a brick while they talked and then asked Laura Joy to hold it while we prayed together. I asked her how it was to hold that brick and she said, “it was

heavy!” Then we put that brick on the floor in a sheet and had all the kids hold the sheet together. I will never forget the first kid who said, “Hey, when we hold it together it hardly even feels like I’m carrying anything!” What a lesson for them to learn - how to share their hardships with their friends, pray for each other, and make the load less for everyone. These kids know community and they know the power of prayer. Indeed, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses to a radical, loving, creative, amazing, God. And by the grace of that God, with the help of Jesus Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit, all of us pilgrim people will join that cloud too as we travel along this path together.