

THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES
A Sermon on the Symbols in St. Pauls Sanctuary
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Second Sermon in the Series
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Text: Hebrews 11:1-12:2 (included at end of sermon)

When times are tough, we only have to come into this holy place and be reminded that times have always been tough. But, but, but God's people have persevered. And not only persevered but become a part of the cloud of witnesses to the God of ages past, who is still our hope for years to come.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Sunday after Sunday the lives of people past surround us, inspire us, and give us courage to run the race and keep the faith. They are up in the windows and high atop the columns. And down lower in the side aisle windows. Some of them may be right near you in the pew.

Our worship experience at St. Pauls is influenced by the words of the sermon (or at least I hope so) and by our prayers; by the glorious sound of the mighty pipe organ and the equally glorious music of the choir, and soloists and instrumentalists, too. But our worship is also influenced and inspired by the sights that surround us. The sights are often more subtle than the sounds, less conscious, but still powerful.

The first thing that new worshipers notice when they come into this sanctuary are the windows. The brilliance of the stained glass windows, high and lifted up above our heads. The windows telling the story of the life of Jesus Christ in bright and bold colors.

How appropriate that the builders of this sanctuary should choose to let the sun shine in through bold and brilliant colors to witness to the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ, for Jesus Christ was not a pastel person. The life of Jesus from beginning to end to beyond was a life of brilliance. He lit up the darkness and dispelled the dreariness wherever he went. Of course, not everyone liked that. The people who walked in darkness had seen a great light, but some preferred to live in the darkness, kind of like some of our politicians. But in him there was no darkness at all. And so we sit here in this place today flooded by the Light of the World. Starting from back in the southwest corner of the sanctuary and moving all around us we have the birth of Jesus, his childhood, his baptism and the call to his disciples. We have his sermon on the mount and some of his miracles. There is the woman at the well and Jesus with the children. Palm Sunday is there and so is the Garden of Gethsemane. His crucifixion, of course, and the resurrection. And the post-resurrection appearances and the newfound courage of his disciples, too. And way in the back is the window of the man who was blinded by the light of Christ and given new sight, our very own Saint Paul.

Yes, the big bold windows tell a big bold story, but there are other windows, too. Ones down closer to our level in the side aisles. Jesus Christ is not there. Nor Saint Paul. But there are martyrs: Stephen and John Huss and Joan of Arc. (We know Joan of Arc.) And prophets: Amos

and Hosea and Jeremiah. (We certainly know Jeremiah.) There are Athanasius and Augustine (who we don't know so much) but we do know about the Christians who were fed to the lions in the Roman Coliseum. There are the healers and missionaries: St. Francis of Assisi (we prayed his prayer this morning), Albert Schweitzer, and Dr. Livingstone, I presume. There are also musicians and artists, Bible translators, and the Reformers. Witnesses. A great cloud of witnesses to the wonder working power of God in all times and places. These down here in the side aisles are a little less bold and brilliant in color, but powerful people nevertheless.

And, then, there are the disciples. They are way up high. But made of plaster. Plaster crumbles, you know. And many of them did crumble under pressure, in the face of danger. Just as we do. And yet, through it all, they lived and died for their faith. The disciples are represented in this sanctuary by shields. Not surprising, there are 12 shields. One at the very top of each of the columns. There are 12 shields up there. And yet, one is missing. Who do you think might be missing? Well, old Judas Iscariot, of course. Now personally, I think it is too bad that Judas Iscariot is missing. He may not be a good inspiration for us, but he certainly is an excellent reminder for us. A reminder of how close we all are to betraying and being betrayed. He is not there, but up there, encircling us every week, are Simon Peter, James and John; Andrew and Philip and the other James; Thomas and Bartholomew and Matthew. Thaddeus and Simon the Zealot and Matthias, who took the place of Judas.

Now, I have to say that the shields of the apostles have always been the least interesting symbols in this sanctuary for me. I also have to say that the disciples did not carry shields. The shields and their symbols were created by the Christian church at the time of the Crusades. The church made the disciples into warriors in order to inspire believers to courage, and unfortunately also to prejudice and bigotry against the Muslim world. In truth, the disciples were much more like wayfaring strangers than they were warriors. So, those shields up there never interested me much, and I have to admit that it took doing this sermon to prompt me to learn a little more about the symbols on those shields. And I did learn something. What I learned that is most interesting to me is that 7 of those 12 symbols represent the way the disciple was killed. And one of those 12 represents the way someone tried to kill the disciple by poisoning. Three died by being crucified on a cross; Peter by being crucified upside down. One was killed with a spear; another by being flayed with a knife. One was beheaded with a saw, and another was hacked up with an axe.. They died in some horrific ways at the hands of those who were threatened by the Light of World that these disciples carried forward with them into the darkness of the world. They died for their faith. And that makes them different from us. At least that hasn't happened to us yet. Different from us, but nevertheless, influential for us.

In a sense all of these faces in the windows, and the stories in stained glass and the shields with symbols represent people who lived fully and completely for their faith. And that is why they surround us as a cloud of witnesses. That is why they are here with us each week. To give us hope that in life, in death and in life beyond death, God is with us and we are not alone. And, I honestly believe, they are here with us. Not just in glass and plaster and stone, but in spirit. In spirit. And I also believe that being with us in spirit is a much more powerful phenomenon than we might ever imagine. Through the eternal memory of God their lives are made available to us, not just as history but as a kind of incarnation in us. (That's a bit of what is called Process Theology for those who might be interested.)

In the mind of God, in which nothing, no one, is ever lost, they have become a part of us, a part of who we are and why we are here. As the United Church of Christ slogan says: God is still speaking...through these people to us. These are our ancestors in faith and we carry their genes. Their faith is genetic. It keeps us going in good times and bad times. They are part of salvation history (something Avena referred to in her sermon last Sunday), the history of God working through time, toward the time beyond time, when all are one and God is all in all.

The writer of the book of Hebrews understood how the sweep of salvation history works. He listed one person after another, Abraham and Sarah and Moses many others, right on down to Jesus Christ. People who died not seeing the end but trusting that God was in charge and that God is good. The book of Hebrews is in the form of a letter, but it is more of a position paper written by a person who was able to see the whole picture. Not just the individual day-to-day joys and concerns, celebrations and agonies of our lives (those things we become so obsessed with and often trapped by), but how our lives are connected one to the other throughout time. Rather than becoming discouraged or paralyzed by the present, he gathered up the past and used it for inspiration for the present and future. And in that he found hope. He wrote, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen..." And "...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," he said, "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...and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

That's it. That is why we are surrounded by this cloud of witnesses so that we might know that whatever happens to us has happened before to people who have persevered. God was with them. God is with us. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God who has worked in all of these multi-dimensional people who are represented in two-dimensional ways, but whose lives are still lived in us. And I believe that's what the builders of this sanctuary intended.

But, you know, there are also some unintended witnesses as well who seem to inhabit this place with remembrances of their existence. Sometimes when the atmosphere is right, you can smell smoke up here near the altar and back behind the organ. Not the smoke of the fire that destroyed the 1898 sanctuary on Christmas Night, but more like...cigarette smoke. Cigarette smoke still wafting about this place from a not-too-distant past when a former organist would exit the organ for a smoke in the stairwell during the sermon. (He always said he could hear better there!) In fact, it was on the night before Christmas one year that the smoke came from the stairwell and encircled the altar like a wreath causing an alto in the choir to panic, thinking that there was about to be another Christmas fire at St. Pauls. Talk about a cloud of witnesses. And stories.

Stories and symbols and songs. All of these become a part of a community of people, with a past, a present and a future. A people moving through time, toward a destiny. We who are here now take all of these with us. From Sunday to Sunday. Kind of like the Verizon network, I suppose.

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Hebrews 11: 1- 12: 2 (selections)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction (evidence) 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 was made from that which is not visible.

By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, “bowing in worship over the top of his staff.” By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.. By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king’s anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible.

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 raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, and 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 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.