

I Kings 17:17-24 and Hebrews 11:32-40

“A cloud of witnesses to faith”

From every since I can remember my last name has been something that I have relied upon as something that serves as an advantage to me in whatever situation I might find myself. I remember vividly in 6th grade the teacher in front of the class saying I had an 89 average but because I was a Bronkema she would give me an A. I remember in high school when I got kicked out of English class for the day and went to the principals office the vice-principal looked at me, called my brother out of class and had him yell at me instead of the principal. True story, I never got kicked out of class again.

When I was in seminary more than one time I would interact with professors who had my grandfather as their professor or my father as a classmate, and that was always to my advantage. When we worked in Italy I had people come up to me and say that they had worked with my father and had stories about police escorts to the Vatican and mischief that was done with my father, again, all that came to my advantage. There has been a cloud of witnesses associated with my last name that has followed me throughout my life that has put a bit of pressure upon me. Every now and then I find myself asking the question, have I done enough.

While that cloud of witnesses has paved the way for me and have been super easy coattails to ride, it also creates a sense of expectation and responsibility that makes you stop and ask the question every now and then, have I done enough for the kingdom. When those who have gone before you have done well, when you have a good example in front of you, you don't want to be the one who ends the chain, you don't want to be the one who makes that cloud disappear.

Faith, by its very nature, is geared toward the future. The faith that we had and the faith of those before us, that cloud of witnesses, is not at all about the past, but about the possibilities that arise before us in the future. If we do not have faith, then our future is bleak and without hope. With hope, our future has endless possibilities and there is no one who can tell you to stop right there.

First Presbyterian Church of Strasburg has a history of people of faith and we have seen their lives make a difference in the future of our community. We continue to have people who have lived out their faith within this community and then in their passing they have valued so much the impact that this church has on people that they leave behind financial resources to continue that journey of faith for those of us who remain. Every family in this church has been

impacted and will continue to be impacted by these legacies left behind. I hope that every family who worships here considers doing the same for the generations that come next.

Our Scripture for today speaks about those who have gone before us and the path that they have paved for us. Let's read.

READ

Our first Scripture for today is a story of one of the most well known prophets in the Old Testament, Elijah. Remember him? He was the one who fought the prophets of Baal and won with fire coming down from heaven. He was the one who hid in a cave and waited for God to reveal himself but God was not in the wind, or the fire, or the earthquake, but rather in a still small voice. Well, this same prophet the chapter earlier than this passage heard about a widow who was absolutely destitute and was about to go home and prepare a meal for herself and her boy and then die of starvation because that was all that they had left in the house.

Elijah miraculously provides food for her and her son and then ends up living as a tenant in the same house where she lives. This same widow's son get sick and dies and she is furious. All was well and good when Elijah saved them from starvation, but now with her son sick her memory is very very short and she has forgotten the faithfulness of God and the ability of those who have already acted in faith to save their family. She confronts Elijah and says to him because her son is sick: vs.18.

When crises arises, faith is tested and when faith is tested we get testy. It isn't just the widow, Elijah calls out to God and says vs.20 where we can fairly say that in this time of crisis doubt has arise both in the widow and in the man of God. If that is the case and they have already seen God work miracles to save their lives, then what chance do we have to maintain our faith in a time of crisis? Well, this is one more story to add to our arsenal of faith, because Elijah does raise the boy from the dead.

But the fact remains that this cloud of witnesses to the faith that we have in God can seem to evaporate very quickly when our faith gets tested. All of a sudden we seem to transition from being in community with those whose faith has strengthened us to us against the world, completely isolated and alone. We can never forget the community of faith when our faith is tested or else we can easily get lost in our own self pity and in our present and past without any hope for the future. Faith is the response of all who are conscious of their own weakness and

accordingly look to God for strength, and often that strength is found through the community of faith.

This is the message that the author of Hebrews wants to get across. Our faith is not just us against the world, it is lived out within the community. So where are we now in this great sermon of Hebrews? The preacher has talked about the biggest threat to the community is that one little word, apostasy. Who remembers what apostasy is? Leaving the community of faith, and leaving the faith in general because of the very clear and present dangers that are part of being a first century Christian. Dangers that we don't fully understand or value.

This term a cloud of witnesses isn't used until chapter 12:1, but before that verse we have this lead up here in these verses that we have read. The author is trying to remind those hearing these words of all those giants of the faith that went before us and paved the way before us, so that we are able to claim the faith that we have today. Without these giants of the faith our lives would look very different, and our faith would look very different as well.

In the beginning of this chapter we hear about Abraham, and Moses, and Rahab, and then in our reading today he says very clearly I don't have enough time to tell you about Gideon, and Barak, and Samson, and Jephthah, and David and Samuel and the prophets, but then he goes and tell us about them. I remember in college there was this one fellow student and you knew that whenever he began a sentence with Let me briefly say, you knew he was going to talk forever, he was going to be filibustering.

We have laid before us this Sunday morning these giants of the faith who were able to survive and thrive because of the faith that they had. He then goes on to list 27 different things that they were either able to accomplish miraculously, or that they were able to overcome miraculously all because of the faith that had been gifted to them and that has been gifted to us as well. It leaves us with the feeling of, we should all want to strive to be like them. At certain points of our lives we should be asking that question, am I doing enough. It gives us a certain responsibility that we cannot avoid, except through apostasy, but that we are called to live out into the future.

It almost leaves us with a sense of we are not worthy, we can never be as good as they are. But look at verse 39 because it takes us in a direction we would not probably expect after a run down of the pillars of faith. He basically asks the questions: Who has it better than we do? Nobody. All that faith, all that righteousness, all those sufferings and yet they did not receive

what was promised. In fact, vs.39 says that we have it better. It is not just in these verses, but throughout Hebrews we are hearing how our position of faith is better than these giants of the faith. Chapter 1:4 better than the angels, 7:19, provides a better hope, 9:23 a better covenant, 10:34 a better covenant, here in these verses 35 a better resurrection.

Why is our faith better than these Old Testament pillars of the faith? Because of Jesus. This is what the author has been saying all along. We have a better covenant because we have direct access to God which was not possible before Jesus came along. All these with their life sized faith, cannot compare to the promises we have because of Jesus. The promise that we have in Jesus, of being able to directly approach God, makes us perfect, something they did not have.

These pillars of the faith received some promises as we read in vs.33, the promised land, but not **THE** promise of the new covenant. They did not, in spite of their faith, have full access to God. They were denied the historical experience of the messianic perfection until Christ could share in it. They did nothing wrong, these witnesses of the faith, just that the emphasis is placed on the sovereignty and grace of God, and not how great their faith is.

We have produced a lot of giants of the faith here at FPC. Kristin is one of them, and I know that she would hate that I just said that, but I have the pulpit, and it is the truth. What makes a person a giant in the faith is not their skill or their intensity, that helps, but rather their love of Jesus and their relationship with Jesus which impacts not just their own individual lives and the life of their family, but rather the community as a whole. When we rely upon Jesus for all things, even and especially in times of crisis, then God can work through us.

Brothers and sisters, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses of faith, and as a result, our future is secure. Amen.