

Sunday: August 15, 2010

Scripture: Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalm 80:1-2;8-19

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

Sermon: A Cloud That Does Not Obscure Our Vision

Call to Worship:

Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel

You who lead Joseph like a flock;

You who sit enthroned between the cherubim

Shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh

Awaken your might, come and save us.

You brought a vine out of Egypt;

You drove out the nations and planted it.

You cleared the ground for it,

And it took root and filled the land.

Return to us, O God Almighty!

Look down from heaven and see.

Watch over this vine, the root your right hand

Has planted. The Son you have raised up for yourself.

Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,

The son of man you have raised up for yourself.

Then we will not turn away from you;

Revive us and we will call on your name.

Restore us, O Lord God Almighty;

Make your face shine upon us that we may be saved.

Hymns: #150 Come, Christians, Join to Sing

#339 Be Thou My Vision

#206 O Hear Our Cry, O Lord

Prayer of Confessions:

Eternal God, by Faith we follow you all the days of our lives. By Faith we greet each day with joy and warm expectations. And by Faith we wait for that time when we shall be joined with you in the Heavenly Kingdom. But sometimes, Lord, our Faith seems so weak. We worry about things that don't amount to much in the great scheme of things. We let concerns and fears overtake us and we do not rely upon you for daily grace to meet the challenges of life. Our Faith wanes and our trust in you fades and we resolve into ineffective witnesses of your Love and Grace. Forgive our lapses of Faith, dear Lord. Strengthen the Faith that we do have, so that the Christ who's Faith was perfect may become for us the foundation of our own Faith. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

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Now, I want everyone to imagine that a cloud had descended on Altavista. This cloud is so dark and pervasive that the sunlight is filtered out and the darkness is almost like the darkness of night. Only a tiny refraction of light makes it through the clouds. It's kind of depressing to think about, isn't it. Think about the pictures we have seen from the streets of Moscow, Russia this past week. Wild fires are raging throughout Russia and the clouds of wood smoke are so thick that people have to wear facemasks to walk on the streets of the cities. A satellite photo shows much of Russia blanketed with this cloud. Health officials indicate that deaths due to respiratory malfunctions have reached into the thousands.

We certainly do not want a cloud to descend on us. It's hard enough to breath in this hot weather as the temperature reaches toward 100 degrees. Clouds obscure vision. Clouds hinder breathing. Clouds restrict movement. Clouds can be unhealthy. Ask any driver who is attempting to cross Afton Mountain between Charlottesville and Waynesboro, or travel from Wytheville, Virginia south into North Carolina by way of Interstate 77. Traffic sometimes comes to a complete standstill as the cloud of fog blankets these two major highways.

Now, translate what we know about clouds into the allegory which the author of Hebrews uses to make a very important point. Having spent the whole of chapter 11 reviewing the trials and tribulations of God's people, and the Faith they exhibited in the face of some very awesome stumbling blocks, the author of the letter to the Hebrews calls on us to emulate them. Do what they did. Let your Faith shine out. Throw off everything that would hinder your Faith from shining. Look back at those who have preceded you and the level of Faith they have exhibited. Look back at creation itself.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command.

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain

By faith Enoch was taken away into God's presence.

By faith Noah built an ark

By faith Abraham left his home to find a new country

By faith Sarah was able to bear a child at an advanced age

By faith Abraham was prepared to offer his son as a sacrifice

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Essau

By faith Jacob blessed his sons

By faith Joseph spoke of the Exodus

By faith Moses' mother hid him in a basket in the bulrushes

By faith Moses identified himself with the Hebrew Children

By faith the Children of Israel passed through the Red Sea

By faith the walls of Jericho fell
By faith the prostitute Rahab was not killed with those in Jericho

By Faith, By Faith, By Faith.... Not on our own power, not by our intellectual prowess, not by our good looks, not by our pleasing personalities.... But by Faith!

By faith I went off to college in 1959 even when my parents told me that they could not help with the tuition.

By faith a group of believers in Altavista began meeting in other churches back in 1910 and formed a congregation of Presbyterians.

By faith a group of Presbyterians from Altavista went to Mississippi in 2006 to help rebuild after Katrina struck .

By faith Bruce Harvey grew up in a children's home, became an attorney, then a commonwealth Attorney, and influenced several generations here at Altavista, and is still influencing us today.

By faith this congregation has called young pastors out of seminary and given them their initial introduction into what it means to be a pastor.

By faith a young woman from this congregation, Lauren Sease, felt the call to ministry and is now pastoring Memorial Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, NC.

By faith you who are sitting here this morning have decided that this is the congregation where you can best serve Christ and touch the lives that need Christ around the world.

By faith we have called Kelsy Nicole Brown to become our next pastor.

So, what does it mean to do it by faith? It means that we do not do it under our own power. It means that our actions are "other" directed. And not only that, but when others observe us, they can tell that it is not by our might but by God's might that we live.

Think back now to someone who was for you a point of faith. We all have these folks in our lives. For me it was a Scoutmaster, and a couple who advised our youth group. For me it was a presbytery Christian Educator who believed that I was college material. For me it was a mother whose daily prayer life reminded me that I was being lifted up before God on a daily basis.

How about you. Who would you include in that cloud of witnesses? A school teacher who took special interest in you? A particular pastor who helped you to get a vision of what God was calling on you to become? Did you have an aunt who never married, but loved all of her nieces and nephews and made sure that you knew that Christ loved you?

For many of us who came to adulthood during the 60's and 70's, we include in that cloud of witnesses leaders like Nelson Mandela and Dr. Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, and Dr. Albert Schweitzer, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer , people of different racial complexion, but people who stood up against injustice and abuse because they understood the biblical injunction to "let justice flow down." And more than what they believed, they ordered their lives to serve the Christ who died to set us free.

Imagine, if you can, what The Church would be like without this great cloud of witnesses. Think about it. The truth is that there would not be a Church as we know it. These witnesses have been the building blocks upon which The Faith has grown down through the years. And every generation has had its witnesses.

Now the crux of the message is this: Therefore, because we have such a great cloud of witnesses, our vision is not blurred. Rather, our vision is enhanced. We see in them the example of what we ought to be, how we ought to live. Therefore, because of this great cloud of witnesses, we too ought to put off anything that is keeping us bound up and run the race of life with perseverance.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews slips into another allegory. From the image of a great cloud he slips into the image of running a race: the race of life which each of us have to run.

How have the witness of others in your life helped you to run the race? And more importantly, to whom are you witnessing so that they can run the race.

Right here in this sanctuary are folks that others look up to. Look to the left, now look to the right. Did you see any witnesses? Did you see anyone whom we would include in the next wave of witnesses. You saw the kids leave here for their program. Do you think that there is a Paul or a Silas or a Barnabas among them? Is there another Billy Graham among them? Is there another Christi Boyd in our midst?

OK, how many of you know who Christi Boyd is? Well, if you did not read about them in *PresbyteriansToday*, you need to know that Christi and her husband Jeff are Presbyterian Americans who have moved to Cameroon, Africa where they assist small farmers grow crops which they can sell in the local and international market. In Cameroon the large international agricultura conglomerates have bought most of the farm land and the small farmer has been pushed out. Christi teaches the small farmer how to Grow and dry fruit. Jeff is helping to drill wells so that once arid land can be placed back into production. These are just two of our modern day cloud of witness. Do we have any of tomorrow's cloud with us this morning.

One thing for sure. You and I are never going to be a part of the cloud if we do not shuck the sin and entanglements that block our spirits, and get out there and run the race with great perseverance. Amen.

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