

Can I Get a Witness?

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Hebrews 11:1-3, 12:1-3, selected verse on The Meaning of Faith

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith^[a] our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.^[b]

The Examples of Abel, Enoch, and Noah

The Faith of Abraham Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph

The Faith of Moses

The Faith of Other Israelite Heroes

³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

The Example of Jesus

12 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,^[a] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of^[b] 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. ³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners,^[c] so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Communion Meditation

A Great Cloud of Witnesses- what an image, being surrounded by all those named in today's scripture, even here and now in this moment of time.

Not linear time, but circular, Kairos time, God's time, a moment in time where heaven and earth are not separated, but intermingled, or as the Celtic Christians call it, a thin place.

That cloud of witnesses is those who have come before us, finished their race, and have received their crown of righteousness, but the cloud of witnesses are those living here now, inspiring us to faithful obedience and trust.

When we gather at the Lord's Table at the invitation of Christ, we gather with all those who as the writer of Hebrews puts it "By faith" have run their race with perseverance. And we gather with those around the world today who celebrate World Communion- to express our unity in Christ. Begun in 1933 in a Presbyterian church, world communion caught on during World War II, reminding us of what we hold in common- the gift of faith through Jesus Christ to the world.

This summer we visited Westminster Abbey in London. And one of my favorite parts was the west front of the Abbey where statues of the faithful from the last century are displayed in niches. Perhaps you are aware that the 20th Century is one of the bloodiest centuries for Christian martyrs. Some say this period in history was the costliest for Christians willing to die for what they believed. These ten statues at Westminster Abbey represent world Christianity from Grand Duchess Elizabeth in Russia, to Wang Zhiming in China, to more well-known witnesses like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Their stories are powerful, just as we read of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and Moses. Then there is a great section in Chapter eleven naming the faith and action of heroes like Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samuel, David. The writer tells us they were all commended for their faith, but apart from us, apart from you and me, they are not complete.

Apart from us they are not complete?

Consider that we as a church as part of that race. The baton is passed from generation to generation, and we are the faithful for this time and this place. What a responsibility and calling.

As a child I had exercise induced asthma which kept me out of the races in PE classes sometimes. I would get so frustrated that I would go home and run sprints until I could not breathe and my chest hurt, angry at my condition. I once entered the town festival fun run just to prove to myself I could overcome this. I ended up runner up in my age group, which was not impressive since it was a small group in that 18-25 year olds, **but I completed the race and that is what mattered to me.**

Perhaps like me, you wonder about your own abilities or think “who I am to call myself faithful?” in light of these great witnesses. Those thoughts can keep us from entering the race altogether. Looking at those named in Hebrews and those statues on Westminster Abbey, I might give up before I begin.

Maybe we need to remember that winning is not the goal, but finishing the race is the goal.

And we need to remember who cheers us on. Looking at this list, none were exactly considered “winners” in the classic sense:

Gideon, for instance, was a reluctant warrior. He was not confident in his own ability and he asked for proof that it was actually the Lord talking to him. (Judges 6-8)

Barak refused to go to battle without Deborah at his side, and while there is nothing wrong with that, still it must have been unusual in that time. And even more, he put his life on the line, but was told up front that in the end the honor would go to another- and in his case to another woman, Jael. (Judges 4)

Samson, for all his superhuman strength, does not come off as all that bright. His story comes to a close, he dies making his point. (Judges 16)

Jephthah, though described as a mighty warrior, essentially traded the life of his only child, his daughter, for a military victory. (Judges 11)

David was the celebrated, ideal king of the nation of Israel, but for all of his remarkable gifts, he committed adultery and arranged for the death of the husband of his lover, Bathsheba. (2 Samuel 11:1-12:25)

Samuel, for all his faithfulness, never convinced the people that being ruled by a king would be their downfall. (1 Samuel 8:10-22)

And as for **Rahab** who is mentioned first of all the heroes of Israel, she is still remembered as being a prostitute.

These are our witnesses in the faith. They were less than perfect, but God makes them complete. The work of faith is a gift and it ultimately is God's doing, we just do our part, taking a lap, and running it to the best of our ability.

If we become discouraged and tempted to hang up our running shoes, we should remember them. Regardless of our strengths, failures, successes, moral weaknesses, God wants us to get in the race and trust God to provide.

We are not called to win, but to persevere, to finish.

So instead of looking around and watching others race, we are to lace up, get on the road. Our point of reference is Jesus. We look to him who for the sake of the joy set before him, endured the cross. He is one the world did not regard as a winner, but the ONE who shows the way. He leads us to the finish line.

We are never alone, but surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. They whisper in our ears, encourage our hearts, and are present to us here and now in that circular kind of time.

Harry Potter has been the epic book series for a generation¹. Fans of Harry Potter will remember very well what happens in the final book when Harry is gifted with one of the final artifacts of the Deathly Hallows- the resurrection stone. As Harry grasps the stone in his hand, suddenly he is surrounded—if you will—by a cloud of witnesses of those who had died for the cause of keeping evil at bay.

Harry sees his **father and mother** who died defending his infant self from Lord Voldemort eighteen years earlier. He sees his **godfather Sirius Black** who had been murdered a couple years earlier by one of Voldemort's minions and **Professor Lupin** who had died that very night battling Voldemort's forces.

“Why are you here?” Harry asks, to which his mother replies “We never left.”

They had been with Harry, in his heart, all along and would stay with him in the impending death Harry expected as he was going to sacrifice himself in one last attempt to defeat Voldemort.

Their witness helped Harry march toward his enemy and face his own death in the course that had been marked out for him. Seldom has there been a moment in fiction or in movies that so closely mirrors Hebrews 12:1-3.

We have a race set out before us and it's our sacred pleasure to run it for Jesus' sake. Even when we grow weary or discouraged, we have a role model to follow and the Spirit gives us the strength to give it a shot. We draw inspiration from that great cloud of witnesses detailed in Hebrews 11. And above all from the Jesus who even now sits at God's right hand to keep an eye on us. Jesus keeps sending us his Holy Spirit to breathe and live and move through us.

So today, we invite you to consider the question:

Who is the witness to the faith that most influences you in your journey of Christian living?

We will hear from some of our disciples first in a video presentation.

Ponder- who is that witness for you.

Then after a moment of quiet, take your cloud found in the pew racks and write their names on them. We will collect those clouds in the offering plates. And they will be displayed in the coming weeks to encourage us.

Listen now to the testimony of these Fort Hill witnesses...

(Video launch)

ⁱ Thanks to Calvin Theological Seminary Center for Excellence in Preaching always, but also on this reflection on Harry Potter.