



*Rev. Tara Woodard-Lehman - 11-3.19*

## **A Great Cloud**

Sermon based on Hebrews 11:29-12:2

When I was a little girl I'd spend summer afternoons in my backyard, sprawled out in a patch of overgrown grass. This was the late seventies and early eighties, the days of "free-range parenting" when a kid could play outdoors for hours relatively unsupervised. Like other children I enjoyed building treehouses and playing twilight rounds of kick-the-can and capture-the-flag. But my *favorite* past time was nestling by myself in the soft green grass. I'd lay comfortably, my lanky limbs outstretched, my eyes gazing heavenward toward the clouds.

*I loved the clouds.* They shape-shifted and floated across the sky telling grand stories full of adventure, mystery, and intrigue. The sky was like an never-ending, ever-unfolding, canvas. My mind's eye was a paintbrush. Perhaps this was the time in my life when, to borrow C.S. Lewis' phrase, my imagination was baptized.

Decades later I still cloud-watch. In fact, a few weeks ago I heard a program on NPR about an organization of fellow-cloud watchers called "The Cloud Appreciation Society." And you know what? I joined it! I still love clouds and I still cloud watch, but now I often do it with my own children. And though we too, sprawl out in patches of overgrown grass, it wasn't too long ago we did our cloud-watching laying down between *tombstones*. You heard that right. Once upon a time our yard was a *graveyard*.

Before our big move to New Zealand, our final year in Princeton we were invited to move into the old, empty, local caretaker's house. The house was in the middle of Princeton's beautiful, historic downtown cemetery often called "The Westminster Abbey of the United States." We were the first non-caretakers to live in the old

house in the middle of the cemetery and it was an interesting year of learning and adventure. And, it was there in our (grave)yard, between the names and the graves of a Great Cloud of Witnesses, I'd hunker down with my boys and watch the sky roll along. The clouds were like a cosmic reel of film sweeping us up into their stories.

In many ways being caught up in a Story bigger than ourselves is what the book of Hebrews is about. In Hebrews we listen to an epic story about a faithful God. We also hear about *generations* of saints. We hear about saints (who despite enormous obstacles and hardship) trust in God's promises of healing, freedom, justice, and deliverance. The author of Hebrews describes these folks as the "great cloud of witnesses."

Now to be clear, these were not always pious, polite, and well-behaved saints. More often than not they were unexpected, seemingly unqualified, and what some might consider to be unsavory people. As Martin Luther would put it, they were like all of us! They were *simultaneously* sinners and saints. And it was in the fullness and complexity of their humanity they played a part in God's Story. A Story we too, are invited into. In part, that's what this day is about.

Today we join with the Body of Christ around the world and remember we are all connected. Along with followers of Jesus throughout the ages, we celebrate All Saints Day and remember we're part of a Story bigger than ourselves. Together we remember God's faithfulness. Together we recall God's persistent, stubborn, love. Together we remember those who have gone before us- both mentors *in* the faith and martyrs *for* the faith.

Today reminds us we're not made for isolation. God created us to share life together. It's part of our Spiritual DNA. We're made for *community*. We're designed to be in *relationship*. We're called to honor the stories of saints past as well as the stories of saints present- including those sitting beside us, right here, this morning. Look around you friends. You are not alone. As the book of Hebrews reminds us, in

both visible and invisible ways, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

Several years ago one saint in particular, Saint Francis of Assisi, taught me about the Great Cloud of Witnesses and the importance of being part of a Story much bigger than myself.

In the Spring of 2005 I joined a couple other pastors and about twenty retirees on a “spiritual pilgrimage” to Italy. Although our final destination was Assisi, we also visited places including Florence, Gubbio, and a place called La Verna- also known as the Holy mountain of Saint Francis of Assisi. Wandering about these ancient places, listening to sacred stories about the movement of God throughout the ages, was both beautiful and humbling. I felt really small, in a *good* way. Like summiting the top of a huge mountain, or walking along a spectacular coastline, following the footsteps of Saint Francis gave me a kind of “wide-angle view” of the world, the church, and my own life. Similar to the feeling I had as *little* girl looking at those *big* clouds, it was comforting to know I was connected to a Story much grander and bigger than myself.

But it was atop the smoky, ancient mountain of La Verna I recall feeling especially connected to the Great Cloud of Witnesses. One memory remains particularly vivid. I was walking alone along one of the long corridors outside the “Chapel of the Stigmata” looking at old enormous murals called “frescoes.” The word *fresco* means “fresh” in Italian, and for good reason. Frescoes are a form of mural painting in which earth pigments are applied directly to fresh *wet* plaster. As the fresco dries, a chemical reaction occurs and the colors are *absorbed* into the plaster. In other words, the paint is not a layer *on top* of the surface. Instead, the color is drawn *into* the stone becoming *part of the wall* itself. This is why frescoes can last for centuries.

Frescoes often tell stories. And the frescoes at La Verna told stories of life of Saint Francis of Assisi. But here’s the thing. Upon close inspection, it became clear these frescoes were not only telling

stories about Saint Francis. They were also telling biblical stories. In just one painting there would be biblical characters of Ancient Israel, painted alongside Saint Francis and his contemporaries. In addition, patrons (people who likely commissioned or funded the fresco) from decades later were also painted into the very same picture. So in a single fresco there would be multiple landscapes and characters spanning centuries, all literally absorbed into a single bigger Biblical Story. And that's when it struck me in a way it never had before.

I scrambled inside a nearby, nearly empty Chapel, hunkered down in a back pew, pulled out my paper plane ticket from my pocket (it was all I had with me to write on at the time!) and scribbled down these questions: "What does it mean to be painted into a *bigger* story?" and "Am I willing to be *absorbed* into God's Story?"

God's Story came alive for me that day, on top of a smoky, ancient, holy mountain. God's Story seemed to split open, and make room for me. At La Verna I was reminded that Scripture, God's Story, isn't just something we're invited to read, listen to, study, or preach about. God's Story is something we are invited to be *absorbed* into.

Now that's some good news! God's Story is still being written. And we're a part of it!

Friends, even here and now, this morning in this place, we're surrounded by a Great Cloud of Witnesses. Scripture tells us, promises us even, that we're surrounded by saints living and dead. We're surrounded by saints from every tribe and tongue who testify to the deep, persistent, love of a Faithful God.

The great cloud of witnesses Hebrews speaks of, reminds its readers, both then *and* now, that God is faithful even when we're not. This cloud of witnesses tells us that despite their hardships and persecution and all sorts of trials God was ultimately faithful to them. Because of their witness we have assurance that God is, and will be, faithful to *us*. The great cloud of witnesses tells us that although we may not experience the fullness of God's promises this side of the

grave, God gives us tastes of and glimpses into the Promised Land. And someday, we will get there.

Someday there will be no more crying or tears or pain. No more injustice or violence or terror or abuse. No more broken relationships or broken bodies. No more fear or desperate loneliness. This cloud of witnesses assures us that even now we are not alone. And they invite us to be part of a *bigger* story that *absorbs* us into itself.

But, here's the deal. Being absorbed into God's Story requires a certain humility. We have to be a bit like the "paintable" plaster of frescoes. It requires we set aside our longings for a self-portrait so we may enter into God's big, ancient, but still being written Story.

The good news is when we lose ourselves in God's Story we actually find ourselves.

We find and discover who God created and intended us to be. We find healing. We find restoration. We find connection. We find the truth.

When we are absorbed into God's Story we remember who we are and whose we are. We remember how we belong to God in life *and* in death. We remember death *never* has the final word. We remember we belong to followers of Jesus from every time and every place. We remember that we're surrounded by that Great Cloud.

Even today, we're surrounded. With all of our heartache and joy and brokenness and beauty and questions and quirks we surround *each other*. With all we have and all we lack, we offer ourselves to each other. Like those who have gone before us we heed the call to love each other with things like the ministry of presence—bearing witness to each other's suffering and grief. Things like honest friendship—building trusting relationships where we can be vulnerable and take off our masks and armor. Things like tangible generosity—serving each other and feeding each other. Things like acts of solidarity—not

trying to somehow “fix” those who are oppressed but choosing to stand with them with a posture of humility.

Saints, as we leave this place today, let us go encouraged and challenged to share *life* together. As we do, I have confidence we will become even more deeply grafted into that old, old Story about a Great Cloud of Witnesses, who despite great odds and opposition, pressed on and placed their hope in the One scripture calls the Author and Perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.