



Rev. Chris Taylor - 8.18.19

"A Cloud of Witnesses"

Psalm 89:1-2, 14-19 and Hebrews 11:29-31, 39-12-2

Bonnie and I had a wonderful time touring London, Ireland and Scotland earlier this month. We were able to worship in the magnificent St. Paul's Cathedral in London, as well at the Abbey on Iona – a worshipping community that traces its roots all the way back to St. Columba who landed on the tiny island in 563 AD with 12 followers.

We had been to both Ireland and Scotland before, but we fell in love with those countries all over again on this last visit. The people are warm and welcoming, and the land itself is breath-takingly beautiful at every turn.

At one point we made it out to the west coast of the Isle of Skye. We wanted to visit the Neist Point Lighthouse which was first lit over a hundred years ago. The lighthouse itself is on a remote point so difficult to access that an aerial cableway was built to bring in supplies. Visitors, however, don't get to use the cableway. When we arrived we found ourselves at the top of a daunting series of stairways that zig-zagged down the sheer face of a cliff to a valley below. We could see that at the bottom there was a path that led across the valley and then around a high ridge to the lighthouse beyond. We couldn't see the lighthouse. We just knew that it was somewhere beyond the ridge.

One of the members of our small group was wearing a knee brace and even thought she was game, we were talking about whether we really wanted to tackle all those stairs and the long hike beyond when a young woman, someone we had never seen before, came up and told us we could avoid the ordeal altogether and catch a wonderful view of the lighthouse by working our way around the top of the cliff over to our right.

That sounded great to us, and ten minutes later we found ourselves looking down and across the peninsula to an absolutely spectacular shot of the lighthouse itself. We must of sat on the top of that cliff for at least fifteen or twenty minutes, just taking in the magnificent view. It is moments like that, that remind us what a glorious world the Lord has given us!

My point here is that without that stranger, without her witness, we never would have seen that view. It was so much better than anything we could have seen if we had hiked to the lighthouse itself. Up close and hundreds of feet lower, we couldn't possibly have experienced that structure and its setting in the same way. We might have been struck by its beauty, but I doubt if adjectives like "magnificent" would have come to mind.

That's the blessing that a good witness can be: someone who has been there; someone who has seen for themselves the lay of the land. And that, in essence, is what this passage from Hebrews is lifting before us.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." What witnesses? The entire preceding chapter has been devoted to a great catalogue of the faithful: Abel with his sacrifice; Noah who built the ark; Abraham who journeyed into an unfamiliar land; Isaac who brought Jacob and Esau into the world; Jacob who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel; Moses who led God's people out of captivity; on and on the list is laid out before us. All of them people who obeyed the living God; people who stepped forward in faith – not knowing what lay ahead but willing to place their trust in the Lord. And God did not disappoint them.

They stand as a witness to us today, leaning in to whisper in our ear: "God is real; God is good; God is faithful and sure. Trust him. Place your hope for happiness upon him."

"Therefore," Hebrews tells us, "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..."

What kind of weight, what kind of sin is Hebrews talking about? The weight of doubt: those fears and anxieties that push down upon us and hold us back. We lay them aside when we begin to truly grasp, truly believe, that our lives are in the hands of a loving and faithful God. We lay them aside when we place our trust in a God who is at work even now. All will be well, all will be well. Maybe not right now. Maybe not tomorrow. But ultimately, surely, all will be well because we know that in the end God wins. Eternity wins, and God's very Kingdom will prevail.

And sin? This is the impulse, the felt need, to put ourselves first; to place our trust in our own ideas of what is best and right and most needful in the moment.

The issue with sin is that it separates us from what matters most. It separates us from God. It separates us from the person we were created to be and from the kind of life we were meant to live. God hates sin not because God finds pleasure in blind obedience but because God knows the havoc that sin wreaks in our lives – the lives of people that God loves so very much.

So here are these witnesses saying God's will is dead-on. God gets it absolutely right. Obey God, put God first, and you're going to find the kind of life that you've been looking for. So resist the impulse to put yourself first. Learn to love the way God loves us. Learn to obey even when you think you know better than God what makes for happiness – do these things so that you, too, can begin to experience the Kingdom-kind-of life that God longs to share.

“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...”

The use of that word “perseverance” is telling. It suggests this Christian walk isn't always going to be easy; that there will, in fact, be times when choosing Jesus' way runs against our own inclinations.

This letter was addressed to people who were being persecuted for their faith. It wasn't easy to be a Christian in the second half of the first century, especially a Jewish Christian. For many it meant being ostracized by their family and by their community. Being a Christian had social and economic consequences. For still others, it meant imprisonment, torture, and even death.

The Christian faith is not a sprint. It's more like a marathon; a journey that spans a lifetime. With this call to persevere, the author of Hebrews is acknowledging that we are going to face resistance along the way, and that following Jesus takes intentionality on our part. It takes the conscious decision again and again and again to stay the course no matter what might come our way.

But here are these witnesses not just in Scripture, but witnesses over the course of the last two thousand years, and they are all saying the same thing: “This is the one great truth of our existence: God's way is the path you've got to follow if you want to experience this life at its very best.”

Like that woman who approached our little group on the Isle of Skye and showed us a different route to follow, these witnesses are pointing in a direction that runs contrary to where all the crowds are going. It is not the well-worn path of “what’s in it for me,” but the less-travelled route of “how can I best serve God?”

Choose, then, the road less-travelled. Choose God and God’s way and then stay with it. Persevere. And you will find as so many have found before us that this path takes us to a place where the view is breath-taking and the rewards beyond anything we have ever experienced before.