

Scripture**Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2****(NRSVUE)**

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient,^[a] because she had received the spies in peace.

³² And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two;^[b] they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

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.

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,^[c] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of^[d] 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.

Paul reminds the Hebrews of the great cloud of witnesses from Abraham to Moses to Rahab to the prophets to Joseph, who had endured much, been tested greatly but who had lived by faith even as all did not go as dreamed or expected. Paul counsels us to live by their example, put aside every weight that clings, every news report of another injustice that lays so heavy on our hearts, every feeling of despair and hopelessness.

Who wants to join **that** cloud of witnesses? And yet these are some of the stories lifted up. These are saints the writer of Hebrews thinks we need to know about.

There is something powerful about remembering our history, knowing the stories of those who have come before us. We benefit from knowing where we came from; from hearing the stories about how followers of Jesus in the past have wrestled with the same kinds of faith questions we struggle with today. The cloud of witnesses testifies to us today that no matter what challenges come, God is still at work. God is still faithful.

We need that testimony because following the path of Jesus is not always easy. There is a peace that comes from Jesus, but it's not complacency, just putting up with a broken world. Comfort is not the same as peace. The peace that comes from Jesus is a confident hope in the midst of trials.

We tend to think of Jesus' message as being to love one another, to be nice to each other, and that doesn't sound very divisive, right? I mean, who doesn't like healing and feeding people? Who doesn't like love and forgiveness? Well, it turns out doing good and following Jesus is surprisingly controversial...

- Peace is great, unless you're the one who's been attacked.
- Feeding my neighbors is wonderful, as long as there's enough for me first. Or what if giving someone food makes them lazy and dependent on my charity?
- Being forgiven and forgiving others is fine, but surely not our enemies. What if we forgive and they don't change? What if we seek peace, but they keep attacking?

Living out God's love is disruptive, because it means seeing all people as beloved children of God. It includes declaring that even those people's lives have meaning and value and purpose, even those who are immigrants, even those who are unhoused, even those who are transgender, even those who are Muslim, or the 1%, or sex offenders, or athletes; children or gun owners, Democrats, queer folx, indigenous people, teachers, Russians, environmentalists, Bears fans. We declare God's love is for them too, just as much as it is for us, whoever "them" is.

Proclaiming love has consequences, especially loving the wrong people. Because loving your neighbors means standing up for them. Dedicating your life to loving and caring for God's people means using your gifts, your resources, your time and money for causes others might not approve of, even family members, as Jesus talks about.

Jesus disrupts our peaceful, contented lives. Jesus opens our eyes, widens our perspective, expands our horizons to care for each other and for those who seem unlike us.

Admittedly, following Jesus is hard! The comfort of today's Scripture is that we're not in this alone. So many of the saints we remember caused holy disruption, upset the status quo, left behind comfortable lives to engage in God's work of justice.

Think of modern saints, martyrs like Martin Luther King Jr. and Oscar Romero, assassinated for their work. When you find this calling—this work—challenging, you're in good company. But the perseverance of the cloud of witnesses is testimony that God has been and continues to be at work.

Hebrews calls us to run with perseverance the race set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. I hear that verse a little differently when it's paired with Jesus saying, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

When the walk of faith gets hard, look to Jesus, who calls us to nothing he has not himself gone through and overcome. Look to the cloud of witnesses, the church triumphant, the body of Christ testifying to the Holy Spirit's actions throughout history, the body of which we are a part.

I certainly pray none of us will be cut up, tortured, crucified, or any of that, but I also pray that faith will move us into bold action, into bold testimony to the reality of God's love, to the promise that the things of God have the power to make this world different, better, more just and loving.

Friends, you are called to be the next cloud of witnesses. You are called to be the living saints of this time.

- Our world needs you to be holy.
- Our culture needs you to be brave.
- Our society needs you to abandon fear and embrace the call.

Look back and see that the cloud of witnesses is watching. Look back to those witnesses who have gone before:

- 1) they finished their course by faith, so you can too;
- 2) and all the saints wait with longing and excitement for you to finish the race.

Look up to Jesus. We run in the strength that God supplies that in everything God may get the glory through Jesus Christ ([1 Peter 4:11](#)). So, look to Jesus, take heart, trust and run.

Look forward to joy. The joy of all the saints raised and glorified with us in one great consummation of the kingdom; the joy of faith and holiness perfected by the work of Jesus; the joy of being with Jesus, the greatest one in the universe.

I pray that it may be you looking back, looking up, and looking forward. May it be so. Amen!