

Witnesses Before Us and With Us  
Hebrews 12:1-3  
November 5, 2023, West Valley Presbyterian Church

Six weeks ago Rev. Ellen Steele encouraged us through her preaching on Hebrews 12:1-2. She emphasized the connection we have with our fellow saints here today, who cheer us on, in the same way that 49ers fans crowd together and cheer on the team. Even if we're not physically in the same place, we are still connected together through Jesus. Today we're going to take that idea further. When we are connected together through Jesus, we are connected together throughout time as well as throughout space. The author of Hebrews illustrates that with his use of Chapter 11, which leads into Chapter 12.

We're going to start off this morning by reading Hebrews 12:1-3. It's short, so let's read it out loud together:

**SLIDES 1-3**

**"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."**

Here ends the reading of God's Holy Word. (Thanks be to God.)

What's the first word of this passage? "Therefore." What's it there for? It's there because Chapter 11 is all about the faith of the uncounted numbers of faithful witnesses who have gone before us. And it's a long chapter! Here's just a few of the examples listed:

"By faith Abel brought God a better offering..."

"By faith Enoch was taken from this life...."

"By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark...."

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place...obeyed and went..."

"By faith Sarah, who was past childbearing age...."

"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau...."

"By faith Jacob, when he was dying...."

"By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites..."

"By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months..."

"By faith Moses...refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter..."

"By faith Rahab, because she welcomed the spies...."

"By faith Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets..."

Chapter 12 tells us that we are, right now, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses: present tense. But Chapter 11 gives us many examples of who those witnesses are: past tense. How can

people who have already died, be witnesses to us now in the present? This is where it's important to understand that, through Jesus, our connection with one another is not limited by time.

God is infinite, right? We all agree about that. What does that mean? It means he's not limited by space or by time, as we are. Sure, because if God were limited by space or time, then he couldn't have created it. Since space and time do exist, there is an infinite creator. And since Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity, he also is not limited by space or time; the same applies to the Holy Spirit. That's why Jesus can be both every where and also every when, all at the same time.

When we are baptized, when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are connected to him and he to us, right? Does that connection break when we die? No indeed! Psalms 139 (which we read in the call to worship) says, "Where can I go from your Spirit: Where can I flee from your presence?", and the answer to that is, "Nowhere!" The psalmist writes, "Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you."

#### **SLIDE 4-6**

In Romans 8:35, 37- 39, Paul writes, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

#### **SLIDE 7**

And Jesus himself says, in Matthew 28:20, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

#### **SLIDE 8**

In John 14:3 he says, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am." When we belong to Jesus, that belonging continues, whether we are on earth or in heaven. We are connected to him wherever and whenever we happen to live on this planet. And that means that through him, we are also connected to everyone else who is in him.

I find that to be a great comfort, and I hope you do too. We are at that age when we have all gone through the death of someone we loved – a parent, a sibling, a spouse, a close friend. We all know what it's like to grieve. I find it a lot easier to say goodbye, knowing that it's not goodbye for ever – it's only goodbye for now. And, through Christ, we are still connected with one another on a spiritual level. Death does physically separate us, that's true; my mother, for example, isn't coming back to this earth. But she is in Christ; I am in Christ; and through Christ, we are still connected.

That is why the Church has celebrated All Saints' Day, in one way or another, since the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The basic idea is to give thanks to God for the lives of saints, and celebrate the powerful

spiritual bond between them and us through Jesus. In Protestant denominations – including Presbyterian- churches often choose to remember church members, or other Christians, who have passed on and are now part of the great cloud of witnesses. There is no standard way of doing that; but usually it involves saying the person’s name and lighting a candle. At the Church of the 49ers in Columbia, that is done during Communion on the first Sunday of November. So I thought I would give it a try here as well; please let me know what you think.

Hebrews tells us that remembering the great cloud of witnesses helps us to throw off everything that hinders us in running the races that have been set before each one of us. Of course, in order to run (or walk, or roll) with perseverance in the first place, we have to fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. But, as you know, we all face hindrances as we journey through life on this earth. Our shoelaces come untied, so to speak, or our water supply runs out. There are problems. We need help. That’s where the great cloud of witnesses comes in.

Whose face would you most like to see, amid the great cloud of witnesses? Someone who taught you and inspired you? Someone who helped you out when you needed it? Someone who has been your good friend for decades? Someone whom you dearly love, or have dearly loved, and promised to cherish till death do you part? Who encourages you, or inspires you?

I think that each one of us is doing our best to run with perseverance the race that has been marked out for us individually. I think that we as a whole church are doing our best to run with perseverance the race that God has set for us as a whole church. And I also think that it’s not easy for any of us. Fortunately, we are not alone. Jesus is with us, as he promised; and, we are surrounded by our fellow travelers, both in this life and in the next. It doesn’t matter when or how long they lived on earth; what matters is that we are still connected together in Jesus. We are not alone; and celebrating the Lord’s Supper together will remind us of that and give us strength to persevere.

As we prepare to speak names, light candles, and celebrate communion with and in Christ, let’s say together the Apostles’ Creed, that most ancient statement of faith, to remind us of the faith we share with those who have gone before us.

## **SLIDES 9-12**

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,  
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;  
He descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again from the dead;  
He ascended into heaven,  
and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty;

from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.