

Scripture: Hebrews 11:29-12:3

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. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

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— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

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, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of 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.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

It was a year or two ago that Susanne offered a compelling meditation on In Memoriam Sunday from this very section of scripture. The image which stuck with me from that day is a stadium filled with good souls encouraging us in the race to be descent human beings—not perfect, but respectful, mercy filled, aspiring human beings. I continue to appreciate that image from years ago and it brought me back to this scripture text to explore further treasures.

In addition to a stadium filled with people cheering us on in our journey, I am inclined to picture a peloton of bikers, a cluster of runners, a lane of vehicles—helping each other remain constant amidst the turbulence of life. I quote now from the interpreters bible:

“Nothing is so disheartening as a lonely struggle. When no else sees or cares, when no human friend shares the burdens, then misgivings begin to plague us... If we are to be strong, our strength will come in part from sharing with Christian friends the anxieties and burdens of the [challenge]...We are never strong when we are alone....

In the Christian way we rely not merely on the help of present comrades. We are surrounded by...a cloud of witnesses, a multitude that no person can number. By the record of their lives, they reassure us that endurance is possible, that hardship at its worst is but for the day, that the grace of God will sustain us, and that the joys of faith’s rewards are enduring. They show us how to greet the promised fulfillment from afar, how to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Of Abel our writer said, “He died, but through his faith he is still speaking.

All the heroes of the faith are still speaking. And that is why they are witnesses. When we interpret the cloud of witnesses as a massed gallery eagerly watching our race to see its outcome, we miss the main point of the author that they are not mere spectators of our running,”¹ but they are running with us.

I was struck by the comment that the heroes of the faith, of my faith / of our faith community, are still with us and among us. If you are anything like me, you do not feel them at a distance—over in the bleachers, or stuck behind a wire mesh fence, or clapping for us behind the t.v. screen in their heavenly recliners. No. They are with me out lumbering up the hills with me and lifting me up when I stumble upon a rock. Verse 40 of chapter 11 duly notes that they did not run the

¹ The Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes—vl 11, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp 737-738.

race or bike the course without falling down. And we have people who know this and are present (earthly and eternal) to assist us on our journey.

I am taken in this list of heroes that perfection is not a requirement for being a part of this cloud of witnesses. Rahab had multiple partners. Gideon was a coward. Samson was prone to violence and other vices. Jephthah treated his daughter poorly. David, well I will not get started on the underside of King David. The upshot is that despite their failures they still were able to impact their community for the better. They know what it is like to fall down. By faith (by trust), they were able to pick themselves up off the ground and continue on. They know this way.

“Faith has a long memory and profits from the experiences of our forbearers. Faith...hopes (v.1), looking beyond the immediate to God’s future (v. 10, 13 26, 35, 40). Faith is tenacious and enduring, able to accept promises deferred in the conviction that death itself does not annul God’s promises (vv. 8-10, 13, 16, 29-40). Faith is not coerced; believers always have the option of returning to “land that they had left behind” (v. 15). Faith is courageous, acting often in the face of kingly edicts (v.23) and royal fury (v.27).”²

People of our family lines and of lives have died. They have impacted us. The people of the church and faith tradition have, imperfect as they may be, encouraged us. We are surrounded by these people—their words, their actions, their wisdom—so let us be strengthened by the best of what they offered and release the rest. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

² Fred Craddock, *Letter to the Hebrews in the New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*—volume XII, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 146.

Intro (Susanne)

On Sundays we meet to worship in the faith that has been handed on to us by previous generations. In early 19th century Europe many churches, including the Mennonites, began the practice of remembering those who had died in the previous year—doing this on the final Sunday of the church year. So today we name those who mentored and shaped and loved us. There will be many more unnamed whom we will know and remember. And we remember them believing God remembers them and will reunite us with those who have gone before us.

Reading the names

We light a candle for our loved ones who have died this past year and not been named.

We light a candle for our loved ones who have died in years past and whose passing we still mourn.

Thinking of the discovery of unmarked graves at residential schools and other tragedies, we light a candle for those who have died away from family and friends and whose deaths were not known or acknowledged.

Concluding Prayer (Patrick)

Gracious God, remember these who have died whom we have named. Grant to us the assurance that though our loved ones are gone we remain in close communion with them in your Spirit. For in you we all, living and dead, rest in your peace. Thanks be to you who brings life out of death and draws all souls to yourself. In the name of the One Who Was and Who Is and Who Is Coming Again. AMEN

Service of Communion: (Susanne)

We recognize that in these times of physical distancing our sense of community and communion has shifted. Still, the unity and presence of Christ unites us across space and time. So we join together in honouring God's steadfast presence with us as individuals and as a congregation.

Prayer of Confession: (Patrick)

We are grateful, O God, for your abiding presence with your people through the centuries. On account of your faithfulness, not ours, your Spirit continues to guide your people. We come to the communion table this day mindful of that reality. In spite of that which we have done, that which we have left undone, and that done in our name which ought not to have been done, you continually seek to lead us down paths of righteousness. We confess our shortcomings and trust in your steadfast grace and goodness. And for that we give thanks.

Prayer of Invitation: (Susanne)

And the Table Will be Wide" (Jan Richardson)

And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.
And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.
And we will come
as children who trust
there is enough.
And we will come
unhindered and free.
And our aching
will be met
with bread.
And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.
And we will open our hands
to the feast

without shame.
And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.
And we will become bread
for a hungry world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast.

Words of Institution & Communion

A Blessing for the Bread (Patrick)

We offer a prayer over the bread and cup. We give you thanks, O God, for the ways in which you have sustained your people in the past. You supplied our loved ones the bread they needed through their life's journey. You walked with them through struggles, illness, and death. We also recognize, O God, that you have sustained us. The same Spirit has nourished us all. So we give you thanks, O God, that you have brought us to this table today. Forgive our sins. Free us from whatever binds us. Remove our anxiety, fear, anger, and guilt. Come to us in the breaking of bread this day. May this bread / wafer remind us of the nourishment You offer us in Christ and our life together as Christians. Amen

A Blessing for the Cup (Susanne)

We pray over the cup. We give you thanks, O God, that you took human form; that you showed us a new way of living; that you showed us courage in suffering; that you showed there is a power greater than death. Free us from concerns about the future so that we may truly live today. Help us feel your presence in suffering, loss, and death. May this cup remind us of the life and joy God offers us in Christ and our life together as Christians. May these memories strengthen us for the journey yet before us. Amen.

(Patrick) Take, eat, and remember.

(Susanne) Take, drink, and remember.

Concluding Prayer (Patrick)

Holy God, you have first remembered us. May we be faithful in remembering your goodness, manifest in the lives of those whom we especially think of today. Unite us with those who have died, those with whom we worship today, and the whole church of your Spirit around the world.

Lead us always closer to Jesus who feeds us and loves us and never forgets us. We speak together now the prayer he taught his disciples, saying, “Our father / mother.... who art in heaven. Hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done—on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Sending Hymn: #81 VT // #48 HWB “All creatures, worship God most High”

Benediction: (StJ 184 – Jan Richardson) **(Susanne)**

For those who have walked with us, this is a prayer.

For those who have gone ahead, this is a blessing.

For those who touched and tended us, who lingered with us while they lived, this is a thanksgiving.

For those who journey still with us in the shadows of awareness,
in the crevices of memory, in the landscape of our dreams,
this is a benediction. AMEN