

***“Yes, We are Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
And...we are so great a cloud of witnesses too”***

Third Sermon in the Five-week Series: “Yes, And...Storytelling + Listening”

Yes, your story is important...and you can learn from everyone's story.

Hebrews 11 (selected verses) & 12:1-3 (The Voice)

One of my favorite spiritual teachers, Robert Benson, writes, *"All of the places of our lives are sanctuaries; some of them just happen to have steeples. And all of the people in our lives are saints; it is just that some of them have day jobs and most will never have feast days named for them."*

We read 13 names of our own ordinary yet extraordinary saints today: Gordy, Conrad, Dick, Mason Brown, Barb, Dean, Marj, Wanda, Mary, Will, Paul, Fran, and Le. Consider today their collective “feast day.” They will, after all, be present with us today as we take the bread and the cup, and remember the Christ who binds us all together – on earth and in heaven as one communion of saints.

These 13 did not have easy lives, not one of them. But they all had good and full lives:

One loved motorcycles and dogs.

One dreamed of being a rodeo clown.

One lived with a deep grief that few ever knew.

One loved to clip out quotes and cartoons and put them in pastors' mailboxes.

One loved to go dancing and play dominos (actually a few fit that bill).

Two built cabins in the mountains.

Three were quilters.

Two spent lots of time at Green Lake with their families.

One was a nurse.

One owned a restaurant.

One was in a band.

Several grew up on farms.

One was a woodworker.

Five were musicians.

Four were businessmen.

Three were officers in Modern Matures.

Two were very involved with ABW.

Five loved gardening.

Three were in the Calvary Choir...and one played piano for our children's choirs.

One always answered the phone the same way – without fail. (*“Maaa-son Brown here.”*)

One had an obsession with fabric.

One loved musical theatre, another country; two loved jazz, several classical.

One was a missionary in Burma and Thailand.

One defied all medical odds over and over again and baffled his nurses and doctors and his wife and family too.

One we think of when we see the color yellow. Another we think of when we wear purple.

Seven were veterans.

Three were ministers.

Four were mothers.

Seven were fathers.

11 were grandparents, a handful of those great-grandparents.

At some point, all were spouses.

And *all* were members of Calvary, friends of ours, pillars of faith.

That's quite a cloud of witnesses Calvary, Amen? Much like the pink, purple, and orange hues of sunset hovering around our “Calvary cloud” on our cover image today,



Photo by Matt Mansfield

I love how the saints' stories swirl in and around us, highlighting the love of Christ in their lives...just as the cloud

on the cover highlights the cross of Christ on our church. Such a gift.

On this All Saints' Day we remember this good news: Death does not sever our connection to those we have lost. The bonds of love are stronger than death. The lessons that our loved ones taught us, their goodness, their deeds, their wisdom, their love, their jokes, and their quirks – these things have woven their way into our hearts and can never be removed. Thanks be to God for those threads...for at times, they are the only thing holding us together when we feel like our grief is unraveling our lives.

And in addition to all those threads of love stitched through our hearts, our Calvary saints also call to us from beyond the grave – reminding us that they, too, didn't have it all together! *They*, too, had to live by faith and not by sight.

It is so true what they say – hindsight is 20/20. But just because we can see something clearly in our past, doesn't always mean we can make sense of it or understand its meaning or why it happened to

us. Some things in life are forever a mystery, unanswerable by logic or science or reason or experience. As frustrating as it can be sometimes, that “not knowing” is part of what it means to live *by* faith even when we don't have it in us to live *with* faith.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, “*For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known,*” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Nowhere in the Bible does it say that if we believe in God, then that faith will keep us from suffering, or from being confused or hurt or from being overwhelmed...or from grieving. Nowhere in the Bible are we guaranteed that with God all will be good. Quite the contrary. Actually, with God, things get downright gut-wrenching sometimes. And this is because we now what the kingdom of God *should* look like – and just how far from it we are.

Look at all our biblical ancestors in Hebrews 11 who went out on a limb, following God's lead, even when they knew it was a hard and unknown road ahead.

Building a gigantic ark to ride out a storm on the sea? (Noah)

Leaving home traveling as an immigrant to an unknown land? (Abraham)

Giving birth to a child as a really old, probably arthritic, woman? (Sarah)

Hiding your infant son in a basket in the river to “save” his life? (Moses’ parents)

Parting the Red Sea and walking through water? (Moses)

Sometimes we think of these as fantastical biblical stories, and they are...but when you get down to it, what *they* were asked to do is not that different than what *we* are asked to do every day. Take a risk. Trust God. Have faith.

The Calvary members whose names we read aloud today most certainly had times in their lives where they had to take a big risk. They had to trust that *they* would be okay even if their circumstances were not okay. They had to have faith that in the midst of the dream they were chasing, the treatment they were trying,

the business they were beginning, the divorce they were initiating, the depression into which they were sinking, the job for which they were applying, the war in which they were fighting, the churches that they were serving...they had to believe that God was there and would continue to be there. Even when, *especially* when, they suffered.

This is what the author of Hebrews is telling us at the beginning of chapter 12: That even though we may not see the fulfillment of the kin-dom of God in our lifetime, the end game remains the same – to stay focused on Jesus. To stay focused on Jesus because he embodies and teaches us about the only thing that really matters – love. Radical, scary, messy, amazing love. To stay focused on Jesus because he suffered greatly and understands our suffering first-hand, and because in and through his life we never see him growing weary or losing heart...about anything or anyone. Does he get tired? Yes. Does he get frustrated? Yes. Does he run away to be by himself sometimes? Yes. And – even with all these very human reactions, Jesus does not grow weary or lose heart. To follow

Jesus is to live with love, not fear.

Did Noah worry about his family drowning in the sea? Probably. Did Noah question whether these animals were even worth saving? Possibly. Did Noah care about all the people and animals he *wasn't* saving and feel like a hypocrite or like “*what's the point?*” I'm sure. Did Noah grow weary of the monotony of nailing wood together to build a giant boat? Most definitely, yes. And with all this, Noah still built the ark anyway, creating shelter for others, doing what he could do instead of focusing on what he could not do. Noah did not grow weary or lose heart.

Did Abraham wonder if where God was leading him had food and water? Yes. Did Abraham wonder if he would have a stake in the land to which he was immigrating to? Probably. Did Abraham fear for his family and his people's safety? Of course. And with all this,, Abraham still followed God anyway – and left his home country for foreign soil because his life (and faith) depended on it. Abraham did not grow weary or lose heart.

Did Sarah laugh at the idea of giving birth at her age? We know she did! Was Sarah concerned about what others would think when they saw her pregnant? Maybe. Did Sarah worry that something might be wrong with her baby because of her age – or that she herself would die giving birth? I'm willing to bet she did. And, with all this, Sarah still was open to the pregnancy anyway and she opened her home to strangers showing them hospitality when she herself was in unthinkable transition. Sarah did not grow weary or lose heart.

Did Egyptian-raised Moses delay “outing himself” as an Israelite because of what the Pharaoh might do to him? It's possible. Did Moses question whether he was the right guy to lead the people of God to freedom? Yes, we know he did...making up all kinds of excuses. Did Moses close his eyes and say a “hail mary” prayer, crossing his fingers as he raised his staff just hoping the Red Sea would part so his people could walk on dry land? Surely so. And with all this, Moses still led God's people anyway – out of slavery into freedom. Moses did not grow weary or lose heart.

And did Jesus wonder if his message would ever get through? I'm sure he did, after all, how many times do the gospel writers tell us his disciples didn't understand a thing he was saying? Did Jesus fear for his safety when he spoke with the Samaritan woman by the well? Likely. Did Jesus feel lonely in his faith? Yes – his friends fell asleep on him when he needed them most. Did Jesus suffer? Yes, he was betrayed by his friends was beaten and bled by his enemies and died, crucified on a cross.

And with all this, Jesus still kept teaching anyway, he kept loving all people – no matter their differences, he kept praying to God, and he even forgave his torturers on the cross. And yes – Jesus defeated death by his life. By raising hope over hate. Inclusivity over exclusivity. Grace over greed. Belovedness of God over beholdenness to empire. Jesus did not grow weary or lose heart.

And neither shall we, my friends. We shall not grow weary or lose heart in our faith because we follow a man who had *every reason* to grow weary

and lose heart and didn't. And because we have these inspiring examples of saints – both in the Bible and from within our own congregation – who for years and years did not give up when life got hard. Yes, they questioned, *and* they kept the faith. Yes, they suffered, *and* they thanked God. Yes, they cried “*How Long, O Lord?*”, *and* they endured.

They are our cloud of witnesses: Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and Moses. Gordy, Conrad, Dick, Mason Brown, Barb, Dean, Marj, Wanda, Mary, Will, Paul, Fran, and Le.

We are surrounded by their inspiration and love and we are living on their sacrifices and generosity today. They shaped us in ways deeper than we can even name.

You know, more often than not, I have the privilege of honoring these saints when they die. And to prepare to honor their full selves and all facets of their lives, I meet with family members and friends and I ask them to tell me stories. Facts from obituaries are helpful in terms of a getting a person's timeline straight in my head. But stories are what bring them to life. Stories are how we

remember the texture of lives and how we celebrate their legacy.

The best part about stories is this: we don't have to wait until we die to learn the story of another or to have our own story told. *"Yes, we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, and we (you and me) are a so great a cloud of witnesses too."* And I don't mean after we die. I mean today. Now. While we live. Our lives are telling a story, each and every day. We are all a witness. The question is – to what or to whom are we a witness of?

Yes, we all tell a story with our lives, and we are all called to ensure that story is proclaiming the good news of Christ not just what we consider to be good news for ourselves.

I think a lot about this during stewardship time. Simply because our check books and credit cards tell the story of our lives pretty well. They are brutally honest. They tell us clearly what our priorities are, and what's not in our personal accounting tells a story too.

We pay our rent or mortgage to ensure shelter for ourselves,

and do we also give money to Calvary so that Family Promise is supported as they work to end homelessness or to shore up affordable housing?

We pay our student loans and we pay for our kids' private school or college, and do we also give to our church so that our spiritual formation is just as supported as our academic formation?

Calvary, in a month where we focus on remembering the saints and on being grateful for our families and friends, may we also focus on the story of our church and give thanks for the ways in which it is an anchor for us – in times of sorrow and in times of celebration.

You know, when I'm preparing for a memorial service sometimes a family member will tell me a story and say, *"please don't use this"* or *"this probably doesn't make any sense"* or *"this is just a little thing, but..."* or *"I know you probably don't care about this..."* --- and in every case I say, *"Please, tell me."* I care. And even more – I can't tell the story of your loved one without this detail. I may not actually repeat that story in my

message, but just knowing that background about their personality or upbringing helps me understand who they are and who they are not. It ensures the story I tell of them is real, and not fantasy.

Of course, I don't understand all the stories families tell me – so many of them are inside jokes or would have more meaning to me if I fully understood the fuller context and the unique contours of their family life. However, those tidbits help me be the best witness I can be to that person's story and life. It's not always about what details I understand, it's about the whole story that person's life proclaims.

The same is true for our church Calvary. When it comes to our budget and stewardship, you may not understand how every little line item is used, or what the point of this or that expense is. You may not fully know the context of how our staff works, what our job descriptions are, and why we do the things we do. And even with not knowing all those details, you can still know the fuller story we are seeking to tell as a church – and you can support that story wholeheartedly knowing that it is one that proclaims God's

love and mercy and grace for all. Even though it's the details that make a story, the main theme is what we remember and is what makes that story worth telling again and again.

Faith is the theme of our story, Calvary...a faith that calls us to take a risk and trust God.

Yes, we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses that, with God, have authored our story so far...and *we* are a cloud of witnesses today. What story are we telling? And how is your life, your faith, and your giving helping to write it so that it is preserved for years to come?

Amen.