

October 28, 2018  
Hebrews 12:1-2  
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### **“In the Cloud”**

**Good morning! It’s been an exciting week in the McFadden and Hendricks families with the arrival of a new grandbaby. Most of the essentials of labor and delivery have not changed much since my own children were born, but there are some things which are different. Tim and I took pictures of our newborn children, and sent the film away to be processed and picked up the prints 24 hours later. Now, everybody with a smart phone -- and everybody has a smart phone -- is snapping photos and sharing them immediately. Eventually the best images will be collected and saved in one place.**

**I was thinking this week how we save our electronic memories in the digital cloud, and how that is similar to and different from the great cloud of witnesses that the author of Hebrews is talking about at the beginning of Chapter 12. Memory is not necessarily the same as fact, and that can be a good thing. I have found that there are things about my own experience of giving birth which I have forgotten, and some things which Tim and I describe differently. For instance, him eating a hamburger with onions and then expect to coach me in labor. Not a big deal to Tim, but Augh. What were you thinking? To me. Memories of important events in our lives -- graduations, weddings, births, the passing of a parent or a spouse -- are shaped and polished in recollection and retelling. Some details are highlighted and others are forgotten; we remember what we experienced and how we felt, not just a photographic image of what “actually” happened. We can quibble about the details, but different people remember things differently because memory is intertwined with perception and emotion.**

**It helps to have a larger biblical context for Hebrews 12 before we apply it to our own personal context. Hebrews chapter 12 comes right**

after Hebrews chapter 11 -- no surprises there. Hebrews 11 begins with the statement that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." So right away we know that we're not dealing with a literal photographic record of events: even if there had been such a thing as photographs when Hebrews was written. This is about what we believe because we know it's true, not what we can verify and prove. Chapter 11 goes on to a Hebrew Hall of Faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, the people of Israel, and references Samuel, David, the prophets and unnamed women and men who suffered because of their faith. They suffered for what they knew to be true. They were willing to hold out for the truth of what God had promised.

This is the cloud of witness that is being referenced in Hebrews 12: all these people of faith, who despite their loyalty and sacrifice had not yet received what God promised them, because God's promise of Jesus Christ had not yet come. The message of chapter 12 is that we now have the hope of that promise because we now have the example of Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Whatever we may have to endure, Christ has already blazed a trail through human experience to the throne of God. It may not happen in this life, but if we are faithful, we will receive the promise of joy in eternal life with God.

We remember this morning members and friends of this congregation who have joined that great cloud of witnesses. We named some of them today; there are many more who live in our memories: grandparents, parents, spouses and even children who continue to shape who we are and the way in which we live. The gift and the challenge of memory is to sift through our experience and emotion, not so much to determine what is accurate, but to choose what we will hold on to and what we can let go of. Jesus is not only the perfecter of our faith: Jesus is the only person who was perfect. That means that none of the people we remember were perfect, and we were not perfect in our interactions with them. That doesn't mean that we love them less, but particularly if there were emotions which were unresolved at their death, we need to decide what forgiveness we need to offer to them or accept for ourselves. Not all memories are positive ones, but we have some choice in what we choose to remember and how we choose to go on.

**So we Christians are the ones who are able to accept the promise of God because of the example of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, but that promise will not be fully realized until it is in time to join that great cloud of witness around the throne of God. In the meantime, we've still got things to do. Chapter 12 says, "therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet" (12:12) There is work to be done. And here's what the author of Hebrews tells us that work is in the very next verses: "Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble." (14-15) Peace, holiness, God's grace.**

**And here's where that list catches my attention: the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. That's kind of an awkward way to phrase it, but what that says to me is that if those of us who are Christians, who have received the promise of Jesus, are not acting like Jesus, other people will not see the Lord. That means there are witnesses here on earth -- in addition to that great cloud of heavenly witnesses around the throne of God, there is a great crowd of witnesses right here who are the people with whom we interact every day. If they cannot see in us the peace and the holiness and the grace which are part of God's promise, they will not see the Lord. If they see us and can't see Jesus in us, then we have not lived in to the calling of our faith.**

**That cloud of witnesses -- the forefathers and foremothers of our faith from ages past and from our own lives -- they can only watch us, we cannot change them. We can no longer say things we ought to have said to them, or ask forgiveness for things left undone. They are beyond our reach; they are in God's hands. There can still be healing, but only if we choose to do that ourselves. There can still be joy, but only in our remembrance. But that crowd of witnesses -- the family and co-workers and classmates whom we see regularly -- that is where we can still make a difference. We can pursue peace with everyone -- *everyone*, not just the easy ones. We can do our best to offer others the grace of God: certainly the ultimate grace of knowing Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life, but also the everyday grace of tolerance and patience and forgiveness. Because small acts**

**of grace -- just like small grievances -- accumulate over time. Offering grace to others changes us: forgiving others makes others more willing to forgive. How we move past the small stuff is a big deal. So I want to say, Tim, I have forgiven you for that onion breath of decades ago, even though it is still part of my memory it's a memory I can laugh about now.**

**We celebrate All Saints' Day because it's important to remember. To remember and celebrate those who have gone before us and shaped our lives and shaped our faith. But as important as remembering those who have gone to life with Christ, is to celebrate that we who are here still have a chance to live our lives in a more Christ-like way. It is not too late for us to repent, to accept forgiveness, to offer grace to others. It's not too late for us to change, and it's not too late for someone who has never known Christ to see Christ in us. It is a blessing and a responsibility to follow the path that Jesus pioneered and perfected, knowing that path is lined with a crowd of witnesses -- folks who may never see Christ except in us.**

**Brothers and sisters, thank you for your presence here, for your prayers of thanksgiving for lives which we will never forget. We gather to remember and celebrate, and we leave to live and to serve as Jesus disciples in a watching world, knowing that we may be the only Jesus they will see. God bless you.**

**For those people of faith which we read about in the Bible: Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Rahab and David and the prophets -- people who honored Yahweh despite their own imperfections.**

**For Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, whose suffering and death on a cross opened the path to eternal life with God.**

**For the generations of Christians before us, who kept the faith at the cost of their own lives or who made sacrifices so that their faith could be shared and spread to others.**

**For those family and friends who brought us to Christ. Who showed us what it means to live with dignity and purpose and perseverance. Grandparents and teachers and pastors and friends.**

**For the people in this family of faith who support and encourage us and for those people who challenge our powers of patience and forgiveness and compel us to rely on your grace.**

**For the youth and children of this congregation: not only that their numbers would increase, but that we would welcome them and renew our commitment to mentor and teach them, and lead them to the knowledge and love of Christ.**

**For generations yet to come, that we when go to join the great cloud of witnesses, that the work of the kingdom and would continue on your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.**

**God, we give thanks and remember the teachings of Jesus as we speak the prayer he taught his disciples. Our Father . . .**