

Blessed by a Cloud¹

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 1, 2020—All Saints Day

- Hebrews 12:1-2 (Common English Bible)¹ So then, with endurance, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up,² and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne.

This weekend contains a major holiday: Halloween! According to *USA Today*, Americans will spend about \$9 billion on Halloween for decorations and costumes and candy, and maybe even a few socially-distanced parties.² (I don't know if that \$9 billion includes visits to the dentist after all of that candy.)

We've made Halloween such a huge enterprise that we forget its origin: Halloween—originally All Hallows Eve—was the night before All Hallows Day, otherwise known as All Saints Day. In the year 835 C.E. the church designated November 1st as a holy day—a “holiday”—to honor the Christian faithful who had died. They were to be honored whether they died as martyrs defending and promoting the Christian faith or they died of other, more ordinary causes. They were to be honored whether or not we knew them personally.

In its eleventh chapter the book of Hebrews presents a long list of biblical heroes who were able to contribute to God's unfolding purpose because of their faithfulness. “The Roll Call of Faith” is the nickname often given that chapter. Even though those biblical figures all died, because of their faithful commitment to God they are remembered in Hebrews Chapter 11.

Then, in our scripture reading from the opening of Hebrews Chapter 12, we hear all those figures being described using a great literary image. Verse 1 announces that Christians now are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” Other translations describe it as a “crowd” of witnesses, but I've got to admit that I like the older translation better. Imagine the spirits of the saints—all those who lived their lives for Jesus Christ—the spirits of the saints urging us forward, as present to us as a cloud in the sky above us.

In the twelve months since All Saints Day last year, the cloud of witnesses at this church has grown by the arrival in that great cloud of two church members who died: Ruth Wiedemer and Ross Brochhagen. In addition to those two, others in our church's extended family who have passed from this realm to the next include Gary Fresenko's mother Donna, Ann Gilbert's and Sue Krizman's father Gil Gilbert, Donna Jakupca's husband Bruce and her mother LaRain Hudson, Adrina Niederst's sister Debbie Marchand.

How does that “cloud” impact us? I hope that remembering all they contributed to this church inspires us to dig deep into our pool of talents and skills, resources and

¹ This sermon is based on a sermon I wrote for November 2, 2003 called “Overcast.”

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/retail/2018/10/19/25-cities-spending-most-halloween/38167911/>, accessed 10/27/2020

treasures, offering ourselves to this church so that our generosity honors their memories. Thinking about the struggles endured by the saints who have gone before us gives us the courage to press on especially for those goals that are not easy. Knowing that they have actually received the blessing of eternal life reinforces our faith that our labors will not be in vain because God's promise is for you and me, too.

Barbara Walters, famous for her in-depth television interviews of the famous and infamous, was the butt of jokes many years ago because of a question she asked Katherine Hepburn. Hepburn compared herself to a tree, so Walters followed up with "What kind of a tree are you?"³ And that unusual question became part of Barbara Walters' lore.

But you know, when I hear that biblical metaphor for saints as a "cloud of witnesses" I do wonder what *kind* of cloud would best represent our ancestors in the faith?

- On a hot summer's day we're relieved to see a puffy white cloud that gives us a cooling shadow for a while, but we don't want so many of them that we can't enjoy the sun.
- The folks fighting wildfires out west would give anything for rain clouds about now, but if those clouds came our way in another month, we'd end up having to shovel and plow.
- Those wispy cirrus clouds in the high altitudes are beautiful to behold, but they bring neither rain nor shade.

The cloud formation we're most familiar with in Cleveland is "overcast," and that's how I like to think of that "cloud of witnesses": as a spiritual blessing God has cast over us. The "cloud of witnesses" can inspire us to cling to our faith more strongly.

For our part, we can give thanks for the blessings we received because of those faithful ones who have died, those "saints" throughout the centuries:

- we give thanks for those courageous pilgrims who ventured across an ocean to seek freedom of religious expression;
- we give thanks for those visionary settlers and itinerant ministers who pushed beyond the wilderness of Connecticut to establish homesteads around here in Connecticut's Western Reserve;
- we give thanks for those visionary Presbyterians who decided to invest their hard-earned money and precious time and energy to establish a Presbyterian congregation and build a Presbyterian church in Rocky River;
- we give thanks for beloved sisters and brothers in Christ like Ruth and Ross who shared their lives with us in this church.

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. Those loved, departed saints may not have felt particularly saintly; the lives they lived couldn't have been perfect; but they had dedicated themselves to seeking the way of Jesus in what they said, what they did, what they stood for. "Since we are surrounded by so great cloud of witnesses, let us... run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

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³ <https://www.today.com/popculture/baba-wawa-remembered-four-memorable-barbara-walters-moments-1C9904738> accessed 10/29/2020