

A Litany of Faith
The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan
Westminster Presbyterian Church
August 14, 2022

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

²⁹By 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.

³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.

³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They 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— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since 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, ²looking 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.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

David Segars.

Roslyn Gragg.

Mae Fretwell.

Constance Skelton.

Eliza Kathleen Watt.

David Terry.

Booty Catlin.

Bill Buchanan.

Meri-Kate Marcum.

Pat Pattillo.

David Segars was my 8th grade teacher. We called him Pops. He also went to my church when I was growing up. Over the past year he has sent me at least two cards every month. To let me know that he is praying for me. To let me know that his Bible Study group is praying for me. Even when he lost his beloved wife of 50+ years last summer, he still reached out to me.

Roslyn Gragg is a member of the first church I served as pastor in Rocky Mount, NC. Roz's husband, Larry, suffered from decreased cognitive function following a stroke in 1990 when they were still a relatively young and vibrant couple. She faithfully cared for Larry 30 years. Never leaving his side. Making his life beautiful and full.

Mae Fretwell was the prayer partner assigned to me in the 9th grade. She faithfully prayed for me, loved me, and cheered me on until her death in 2013. Each Christmas she took me out to lunch with her own granddaughters because she considered me family.

I never knew Constance Skelton, but I knew of her. A gift she gave my home church enabled the building of the Family Life Center that housed our youth areas and gym. That place welcomed and nurtured me and countless other young people in the Anderson community. And it still does.

Eliza Kathleen Watt was my great-aunt. Never married, life-long teacher, she was as close as a grandmother to me. She is my namesake, my daughter's namesake, and was a lifetime Presbyterian Woman. She planted the seed of faith in my mom's life and therefore, mine.

David Terry is also a member of my home church. He was also my neighbor growing up. I'm pretty sure he told my parents about my speeding that resulted in my car being taken away for two weeks when I was 17. He was also the chair of the scholarship committee that paid most of my way through seminary.

Booty Catlin was a dear and beloved member of the church where I served as a youth director in college. Booty and her husband, John, were in their 80's, but they were my number one youth advisors. They went on every trip with us and were in the pews at my wedding.

Bill Buchanan is still a friend of mine. We got to know each other while serving on the board on a non-profit free clinic in North Carolina. Bill lost his 6-year-old child when he was hit by a car in their neighborhood. That loss marked Bill, but it also guided him to serve others in the name of Christ. I last talked to Bill when I was a reference for him 2 years ago. He wanted to become a first responder with the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance agency.

Meri-Kate Marcum was my first "boss" in the church.

She hired me the summer after my freshman year at Clemson to work at a Day Camp for kids at Mt. Pleasant Presbyterian Church. She has continued to nurture me in faith and threw my baby shower. Meri-Kate is the director of a preschool in Atlanta and is currently in seminary to get her M.Div.

Pat Pattillo was a member of the church where we worshipped while I was at seminary. One of the most accomplished business leaders in the Atlanta area, he was also one of the most humble. For over 25 years, his foundation paid for seminarians to travel to the Middle East each summer so that they could broaden their world views, learn from one another, and be better prepared to serve as pastors of churches. I was blessed to be a part of one of those trips in 2009.

These are some of the saints in my life. And I haven't even named any of YOU. But there are saints among us in these pews. People who, by faith, have...

Faith. A loaded word, but the beginning of Hebrews 11 gives us a good definition – ***Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. The conviction of things not seen.*** Pastor and professor Frances Taylor Gench describes the faith of the book of Hebrews as active obedience. The faith espoused in Hebrews, she says, “enables believers to live by a vision of the reality of God and God’s purposes for the earth, a vision that is not yet present or visible to the eye. It empowers believers to move into the future with trust and confidence, knowing that the future belongs to God.”

I have a book in my office that I really love. I think I inherited it from a retiring pastor a few years ago and I turn to it often. It is called “All Saints: Daily reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for our time.” Each day of the year is assigned a different person from one of those categories. Some of these individuals hail from the 1st century while others are our contemporaries. Today’s assigned person is Maximilian Kolbe. He was a Franciscan Priest from Poland who lived in the first part of the 20th century. Because of his resistance, he was arrested by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz in February of 1941. One day in July of the same year, the commandant of the concentration camp decided to select 10 men to punish after one prisoner managed to escape. The 10 men were to be put into an underground bunker and starved to death. One of the men who was chosen cried out in horror, “My poor wife and children!” When Maximilian heard this, he volunteered to take the other man’s place. He survived many days in the bunker, becoming a leader and comforter of the other men and was one of the last survivors. He died on August 14, 1941. The man whose place he took lived and was reunited with his family after the war.

Saint. A loaded word for us non-Catholics, but the whole of Hebrews 11 gives us a good understanding of it. It doesn't have to be a loaded word. Our Scripture reading for today only covers part of that chapter, but I encourage you to read the whole of that chapter sometime today. It won't take you long and you'll get glimpses of many stories of God's faithful. But we get a lot of them in just this passage. A saint is simply someone who reflects the goodness of God in their living. It can be a prostitute, a leader with a speech impediment, a mighty warrior, a loving mother. That person can be heroic like Father Maximilian Kolbe or more ordinary like your neighbor who happens to be your Sunday School teacher and reports you for speeding.

Frances Taylor Gench reminds us of the community to which the words of Hebrews were originally addressed. “Hebrews is addressed to fatigued and beleaguered Christians who find themselves weary in the Christian way and on the verge of abandoning Christian faith.” Does

this sound familiar? Are we not fatigued by the pandemic and wars and threats of wars? Are we not beleaguered by the divides in our nation, the harsh rhetoric and the violence that pops up in the name of faith? I know I am. Not necessarily on the verge of abandoning faith, but I worry that people I love are. I worry that our children will look at the church of today and run as far away as possible. The beautiful thing about the words penned to the Hebrews is that they could be written to us. In some ways, by the mysterious power of God at work in the world, they are written to us. To encourage us. To give us hope. To cheer us on in the journey of faith. One thing that strikes me when I read this passage is that these saints mentioned aren't perfect. Nor are their lives. Following God didn't ensure their wealth, prestige, safety, or ease of life. Some of them suffered and suffered greatly. All of them were loved by God, used by God, held by God, and equipped by God. I cannot think of better marks of a human life. I was reading a novel the other day – the 10th story in the detective Gamache series by Louise Penny – when I came across this quote – “It was messy. Unruly. Risky. Scary. So much could go wrong. Failure was also close at hand, but so was brilliance.” This was a quote about an artist who had disappeared in the Canadian wilderness with Detective Gamache on his trail, but it also could be about us. You and me. The saints in the pews. The saints in this place. The saints who have gone before us. In fact, I think it perfectly describes Rahab. The woman who lived in ancient Jericho and made her living as a sex worker. Her life was messy. And when she felt called to help the Israelite spies, it became unruly. It was quite the risk to take them in and help them. It was scary and a lot could have gone wrong as she hid them on her roof and lowered them over the wall of the city after night fell. When God gave the land of Jericho into the hands of the Israelites, God's light and love shined brilliantly upon Rahab and her family.

The first two verses of Hebrews 12:-1-2 are foundational for my life as a Christian - *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, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*

When I read them, two images come to mind. One is my engagement party. The other is my time running cross country in high school. A group of couples from my home church – First Presbyterian Anderson, SC threw our engagement party. Two of them had been my high school Sunday School teachers, one couple youth advisors, another couple I had babysat for regularly and a fourth couple parents of some of my dear friends. But this wasn't an ordinary engagement party. It was a **“Cloud of Witnesses”** party. The hosts encouraged me and David to invite people who were part of our “Cloud of Witnesses”, those who encouraged us in the faith of Christ and were integral to our walks of faith. In a season of kitchen showers and monogram showers, cake tasting and invitation choosing, that reframing was important. How can we make it in marriage, in life, without a community surrounding us, supporting us, correcting us, encouraging us, and pointing us ever to Jesus? From 8th grade through senior year of high school, I was on the varsity Cross Country team at T.L. Hanna High. My coach was wonderful and good. He was serious about our training and racing, but also serious about the team community. He fostered team building through frosty stops at Wendy's during long runs, pasta dinners before meets, and shopping at the outlets on the way home from big invitationals. I don't know if this still happens, I'll have to ask some of our High School runners, but when I ran,

every time you would pass someone from our team during a work-out or a race you would say, "Good job" and you would mean it. You would also find your crew on the team who would help pace you and entertain you on long runs. And if you happened to have a tough race, the teammates who finished before you would retrace their steps after crossing the finish line to run beside you as you finished.

I want to offer a third image for you that relates to this passage. The book "The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse." Its by Charlie Mackesy. Have you heard of it? Have you read it? God definitely wanted me to read it. I was gifted it twice, told of it three times, and mailed photocopies of certain pages by a librarian friend. It is somewhat of an unconventional book in that it is for all ages. It is also printed in the author's own script and features drawings. It begins with a boy who is alone. He then meets a mole and they talk about life and all it's questions and wonderings. Just as they're imagining how they would be if they were less afraid, a fox appears on the scene. Typically, moles should be afraid of foxes, but this fox was caught in a snare and needed help, so the mole chewed through the wire and released him. The boy and the mole continue on while the fox follows. When the mole falls into the creek, the fox doesn't seize that opportunity to capture the mole, but rescues the mole instead. The three then become traveling companions as they proceed to discuss life and how one should be in the world – kind, forgiving, and loving to both self and others. They then meet a horse who teaches them that the bravest thing to do in the world is to ask for help. As they journey on as a group of four, the gentle horse clearly offers the best wisdom. In a particularly poignant moment, the horse offers these words, "We don't know about tomorrow, all we need to know is that we love each other. When the dark clouds come, keep going. When things feel out of control...focus on what you love right under your nose. This storm will pass."

Y'all, we can be the Cloud of Witnesses for one another. We can learn from those who reflected the goodness of God in their time on earth. We can circle back to run with those who need some encouragement. We can mourn with those who mourn, rejoice with those who are rejoicing, we can sit with those who need a break. We have a litany of those who have gone before us...a litany of faith. And there at the finish line, and all along the way, is Jesus, cheering us on, guiding us in his will, loving us as we are, calling us to be what we can be. Thanks be to God. Amen.