

“Those Who Have Led The Way”  
November 4, 2012  
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**Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2**

<sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup>By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. <sup>32</sup>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— <sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. <sup>35</sup>Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>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— <sup>38</sup>of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. <sup>39</sup>Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12

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, <sup>2</sup>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.

**Bob**

There was this man named Bob, who was a member of the church in which I grew up. He served in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam in the Air Force. When he left the army, he went to law school. He was a strong leader in the church, he served as an elder, often filled the pulpit when our pastor was away, he helped cook and clean up at church dinners, and he taught Sunday school.

I remember one night we were having a big church fundraiser dinner. There were tons of kids and we weren't really interested in the program that was going on, so he came and helped us older kids watch over the younger ones in the nursery. He played with us, held babies, and told us stories. That left a huge impression on me, because here was this older man who had served in three wars, caring for the children of the church. It taught me that church is a place where people take care of each other.

Everyone loved and respected him because he so obviously lived a life of faith. Even as a kid I would sit for hours listening to him tell stories about his time in the Air Force, or telling us about the history of the Disciples of Christ, or his insights on the Bible. When he died, people came out of the woodwork to celebrate his life at his funeral and to support his wife. He had mentored and guided so many of us on our faith journeys; he probably didn't even realize how many. He is in my cloud of witnesses.

### **Sarah**

Also in the church where I grew up, we had a Senior Minister for a while named Sarah. I was seven or eight when she came to us. I had been at this church since I was two, but I was right at the age where I was starting to understand what church is all about, what a minister is, things like that.

While she was with us, my grandma (who we called G-G) went into the hospital. She had pretty serious surgery which failed, and then she was in a coma for six months.

Sarah was with us through all of it. She was amazing. I learned through her that ministers don't just stand up here and talk FOREVER on Sunday mornings, they're right there with us when we're going through hard things. They pray for us. She even would ask my sister and me how we were doing. And we were just kids! She was with my parents, G-G, and aunts and uncles when my G-G died, and G-G died while Sarah was praying. I was little when this all happened, but I've never forgotten the way she took care of us and guided G-G home.

When I went to seminary, my mom and I talked about Sarah and how she had influenced me. Mom told me that when Sarah was with us during G-G's death, I told her that I thought I could be a minister like Sarah one day. I had completely forgotten all about that, but I do know that she left a huge impression on me. Sarah, though she is still living, is in my cloud of witnesses.

### **Brenda**

In my first year of seminary in St. Louis, we all had to do field education. In our first year, we had to do volunteer work at a location assigned to us by the seminary. I was assigned to a daycare and pre-school program in East St. Louis. I don't know what you all know about East St. Louis, but it is a town that has seen better days. There's a lot of gang violence and poverty. When I was at the pre-school, I was the only white person in the entire building. It was a very new experience for this Johnson County girl.

Brenda is the director of this pre-school. She's been there since she was a teacher there in the 70s and has built it up to what it is now. Not only does she help provide a safe, gang-free, space for the kids at the pre-school, but she helps their parents as well. She helps the parents find jobs, enroll in GED and college classes, and provides assistance for food and clothing as well. The children who are taught at this pre-school are more likely to go to college and leave East St. Louis than any other kids in town.

I was really overwhelmed by what I encountered when I was there that year. I was heartbroken by the violence, the poverty, and hard lives the kids had. Brenda took the time to help me find my way in that world. She helped me find opportunities to help the kids and teachers. She also helped me process the overwhelming culture shock I experienced. I came there, from my life of privilege, and Brenda helped me try to make sense of the world I found in East St. Louis. She helped me understand the history of East St. Louis and the corrupt systems that failed the people there. She helped me get to know the families better and she showed me a compassion based in her faith in God.

She is not a minister by profession, but she ministers to the people of East St. Louis in a truly amazing and unique way. When I think of someone who has shown me how to truly act out the teachings of Jesus in everyday life, I think of Brenda. Brenda is in my cloud of witnesses.

In our scripture this morning, the author of Hebrews gives an impressive list of people who have come before -- people who have shown great faith in God. They certainly weren't perfect people, but they showed the Hebrew people that, despite their faults, they could live lives of faith. The beginning of Chapter 11 says that

“faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, indeed by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”

These ancestors listed by the author of Hebrews had great faith; despite the difficult circumstances that many of them found themselves in, they still believed and hoped in a God that they couldn't prove the existence of. They had faith.

It's like the writer is saying, “Look! Here's a list of people who made tons of mistakes, didn't follow God's instructions (in some cases) and still, we hold them up as great examples of faith. If they can do it, if Jesus can do it, we can do it too.”

I have my own list of people like those ancestors listed in Hebrews. People who aren't perfect, but they've loved me and showed me what faith is all about. And today, All Saint's Day, is the perfect time to share our stories of who has paved the road ahead of us; who have helped to shape the faiths we hold. The three people I told you about at the beginning of this sermon are only a small fraction of the amazing and inspiring people I have encountered in my short time on this earth who have helped to form the faith I have now.

Who is in your cloud of witnesses? Who are the people who have shaped your faith and guided you to where you are on that journey today? Are they ministers, grandparents, teachers, camp counselors, scout leaders, friends, the list could go on.

You may even be in someone's cloud of witnesses already. That is the nature of faith journeys. I would venture to say that each and every one of you in this church have affected someone's faith for the better. We are not alone on this journey. We are guided

by the Holy Spirit, the amazing witness of Jesus, and a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us.

With this idea that we influence each others faith journeys in mind, what are you doing today that will be an inspiration to the people around you? Our goal certainly shouldn't be to live in a way that looks like we have faith so we can inspire people, because that's shallow and not authentic. But if we keep in mind that the things we're doing today affect the future, it helps us to not be short sighted. It helps us to see that God will always be working through us, even if it's just through a person's memories of us. How are you affecting lives for the better? How are you building the kingdom of God?

Faith is not something we can do alone, no matter how hard we try. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews knew this. I'm one of the biggest introverts there is and really enjoy spending time on my own, but the truth is that I see God working in people every day. My faith has been formed by the people who have been with me on this journey. That's why we have this great cloud of witnesses to guide us and to hold in our memories. So today, I challenge each of us, on this All Saint's Day, to think about those who have come before us and the ways that they've shaped our faiths, and to think about our own actions; what ways are we helping to shape the faiths of our loved ones?

God of our past, present, and future,  
Thank you for the people who have guided us on our faith journeys. Thank you for their witness of faith and trust in you. Help us to be like them and guide future generations along their journeys. Help us to be true witnesses to your love and grace. In your son's name we pray. Amen.