

August 14, 2016
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Hebrews 11:29-12:2

What is Faith? Part II

Does anyone remember these? (large floppy disc) Here, I've even got a blue one. I'm sure the color was a really hi-tech look at the time. Good old floppy discs. Or how about one of these? (smaller "floppy") A step more advanced: the floppy that wasn't floppy. I should explain for our children, who might be confused, give a little history lesson for our younger members: "Children, these used to go inside of computers. These artifacts were once used to store information." I even have a case for this one and others of its kind, a case for storing things which themselves store things: documents, data, files, information. This case has a label on the outside, the label says: "Membership / Contribution: Backup A." So now you can guess where I found all this... in the church office. Our office manager helped me find it, when I told him the visual aid I was hunting for; I had a hunch it might be on a shelf somewhere at church. Amazing, the things you can find, what storehouses of information churches are.

Of course, things have changed dramatically in the past decades, in just the past few years, and I didn't even mention flash drives, or memory sticks—and even they are becoming obsolete. Nowadays, more and more, information is stored somewhere else—and this is true of our church office, too, despite the existence of these discs—nowadays, information is stored somewhere much more ethereal sounding, the height of high tech, so high it sounds almost heavenly. Nowadays information is stored in? The Cloud.

The Cloud. I am tempted to say that the book of Hebrews anticipated this. Yes, Hebrews, a book of the Bible, an ancient, handwritten document that was originally etched on parchment. Although the book of Hebrews is almost two thousand years old, I am tempted to say that it anticipates modern advancements in technology, because Hebrews talks about an information storage system that is A Cloud. You all heard it, just a few minutes ago in the reading from Hebrews: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..."

That's not what Hebrews was talking about, you may be saying, but hear me out. That's a summary phrase, that line that begins "therefore." "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud..." That "therefore" arrives after a list of all these different individuals, different people, all shorthand for longer stories, in computerese, each of them a file name; each a much longer document, all these people who make up this cloud.

There's Rahab—Rahab was a foreign woman with a shocking profession: "Rahab the prostitute," or as she called in older, yet blunter translations of the Bible, "Rahab the harlot." Rahab appears in the Bible after the children of Israel have escaped slavery in Egypt and are seeking place to settle in Canaan, Rahab hides the Israelite scouts... scouts who were visiting her, a prostitute, for... Rahab protects the scouts and becomes part of Israel's royal line—she is listed in that long genealogy that begins Matthew's gospel, Rahab is ancestor to King David, ancestor to Jesus. Also in the cloud there's Gideon. Gideon did not just put Bibles in hotel rooms. Gideon was a military leader and a judge, a tough guy, a decision maker, but Gideon needed coaxing, repeated affirmation, repeated signs from God, convoluted signs that included a fleece and dew. Gideon, the general, needed painstaking and ongoing encouragement before he would go out and fight. Eventually Gideon leads a very small troop to great victory against a much mightier opponent. And also in the cloud there's Samson: Samson the strong man who has weak taste in women. Samson, who was brought to the site and occasion of his greatest feat of all by vulnerability and blindness.

There's still more individuals in the cloud, still more named in this reading from Hebrews. Even more go unnamed, countless people whose names are not recorded but whose actions are: as Hebrews says, in a rising, moving cascade of witness: "they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, won strength out of weakness." They are in that cloud because they did things. By faith they did things.

Last week, in the reading from Hebrews just prior to this one, we heard what faith is: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith is the certainty of possibility; faith is an attitude of ongoing confidence. That's the definition of faith, according to Hebrews—but it can sound a bit out there, an abstraction on the abstract, ethereal, like a cloud. It is—and today we hear what that cloud is made of: people who did things. By faith they did things. By faith the people passed through the Red Sea. By faith the walls of Jericho fell. Faith has a theoretical definition, but a practical expression. As Martin Luther says, "Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. And so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them."¹ Faith moves. Faith leads to action. Faith led that cloud of witness in Hebrews to action—and what they did informs us. What they did forms a cloud of information, and the Bible is a case for it. We could even make a label for that case, we could call it Membership / Contributions, our Backup A.

But we can name yet more witnesses that are also part of that cloud, people who lived after the book of Hebrews was written. Their names were recorded by typewriters, and on mimeograph and fax machines. They include witnesses of this congregation. We might call them our Backup B. There's Dr. Joshua Oden, pastor from 1908-1954, what an impact he had on countless, unnamed people who came through these doors. Or others, longtime members who've died in the past few years: Reuben Erickson, who built an electric company with a commitment to the well-being of the worker, who with this church helped resettle East Asian refugees just after the Vietnam War, who was quietly, perpetually generous—Reuben sat at his typewriter and addressed an offering check to the church the night before he died. Or Elizabeth Greenslade, who brought her children to church, and in whose memory our new nursery now welcomes children. Or Donna Jean Holmquist, whose name is etched on a plaque we have that recognizes service. They did things.

They were not without their flaws. They were not perfect, no more than Rahab, Gideon, and Samson were. Neither are we. We are not perfect, but we have a promise from someone who is. We have confidence, we have faith in someone who does more than store information. With all these bits of computer talk you must know where I am headed, we have faith in someone who saves. Jesus saves. And so, by faith, we do things, too. Backed up by the people of the Bible, and backed up by the people of our church's history, and backed up by the people of our present—people whose names appear below Donna Jeans' name on that plaque—witnesses still with us, and not just them, all of you, all of us, all who are here with us today and other days, I cannot name you all, as Hebrews says, "time would fail me to tell of them all." You with your smartphones, or your dumphones, or with no phone at all, for it's not a matter of technology to truly be the cloud. You are the cloud. We are the cloud. It is all around us. "Therefore, therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." Let us also do things! Let us also set aside sin, let us also run the race, let us look to Jesus, the savior, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

¹ Martin Luther, [*Commentary on Romans*](#), Trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), xvii.