

August 18, 2019  
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Isaiah; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

## Cloudy

“And what more should I say? Of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets” this “cloud of witnesses. The book of Hebrews lists and celebrates a number of faithful Biblical heroes, some more familiar than others. Gideon: you know him, he’s the one who leaves Bibles in hotel rooms. And Samson, the strong man, also remembered for an ill-advised relationship. Also not be forgotten his frequent fits of murderous rage, violent revenge. And Jephthah, so woefully committed, we shudder to speak of Jephthah’s woe. And David, that great king, who first engaged in adultery and then arranged murder. And what more should I say? This host of heroes, they’re not fully heroic. The writer of Hebrews knew these Bible stories far better than you or me, and still said, “Here is a cloud of witnesses.” This cloud of witnesses, they’re cloudy. Their lives are a mixture of moral example and monumental failure. They had exemplary achievements, and experienced life at its worst. Sometimes it was at those very times, at life’s worst, that they came to know what was best, and show what was best. Sometimes it was at the very worst of times that their faith was beyond words.

The life of faith is like that. It’s not simply a matter of believe and be happy. Sometimes, it’s believe and be tested. It’s wonder and wander. It’s hear news you cannot even process, be lost for words, be lost in loss. Sometimes the life of faith is absence, and sadness, depths of despair—and depths of compassion, depths of strength, depths of faith you did not know existed. The life of faith encompasses all of that: triumph and suffering, victory and pain, vulnerability and glory. That’s why we have these stories, noted in shorthand here in Hebrews, these stories of heroes learning humility, stories of strength that shatters, stories of shepherd boys who become kings, who use their power corruptly, who are progenitors of the Messiah, the Christ, the “Son of David.” David being someone who saw several of his own sons die. This is the cloud of witnesses by which we are surrounded, these cloudy, complicated people. Their complicated stores are what we hear, here.

We don’t come here to hear stories that say everyone’s great, everything’s great, it’s all up, up, up. False stories like that are promptly deflated by the prophets, from whom we’ve been hearing all summer, and also by Jesus. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus is speaking in prophetic mode. We also don’t come here to hear stories that say everything is awful and only getting worse, the world is a rotten place. It is a misreading of the prophets to think they say that. Jesus too, could be severe, and we do well to remember that, but he is never nihilistic. In today’s gospel passage and many other places Jesus speaks with piercing sharpness, Jesus speaks with heat and harshness of the signs of the times because he has come to change the time. As theologian Matthew Skinner says, “The fire that Jesus kindles is a fire of change, the fire of God’s active presence in the world. No wonder he is so eager to strike the match.” We do not come here to hear stories that move in one direction only, unidirectional up or unidirectional down, everything’s going fabulous, or everything’s going to pot. Such stories are simplistic, unsustainable, unbelievable, unbiblical. Those stories would not sustain us in faith.

I once read an article which said similar things in a secular context. Research shows that children who know the stories of their ancestors, the family lore—who was this, what did they do, where did they come from—score better on a battery of indicators. Children persevere and flourish when they know the family narrative. But it’s not just knowing the family story that’s important, it’s also how the story is told. There are three basic options to how the story is told.

First, there's the ascending narrative: "We came to this country with nothing, but we made it. Your grandparents worked three jobs; your dad was the first to go to college; now you will do something even more fantastic." Then there's the descending narrative: "We once had it all, and then we lost it. Since then it's been ongoing decline. Nothing ever works out for this family."

Those are shorthand versions of those two options. You may have heard variations of them. You may have told them. You can probably also think of the problems with them. With the ascending narrative: there's no way but up—and now it all depends on you! And with the descending narrative: there's nothing to be done here, cut your ties and go. Neither of those unidirectional narratives are true, or good, or life-giving.

But there is another kind of story, this article said, and it's this third kind that's best: the oscillating narrative. It goes like this: "We've had some great successes. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mom built a business from scratch. But we've also had setbacks. The housing bubble burst. The job went sour. Your uncle lost his battle with addiction. But no matter what happened, we stuck together." This third kind of narrative recognizes ups and downs, knows that life, that people, are a mixture. In this narrative, you name the triumphs and the tragedies. You name them, and you keep going, you persevere, you lean forward, to the finish line. No matter what happened..." "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." That is the story we come here to hear: a story of reality, and resilience, a story of recovery and reformation, the story of resurrection.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." Our eyes have been clouded this week; our eyes have been clouded with tears. On Monday one of this congregation's beloved children, sixteen-year-old Garrett Brodersen, died in a car accident. The day before Garrett had been here in church, playing a piano prelude and a special offering song with his prodigious talent and utter modesty. He was the best part of worship, and then he was gone. Garrett was so, so good, Garrett was good in so many ways. He was a teenager, and so he must have had his shortcomings, but I do not know what they were. He must have been mixed in some way, as were all those faithful witnesses of the book of Hebrews. He was surely one, as the book of Hebrews puts it, "of whom the world was not worthy." He is one now become part of that great cloud of witnesses—but too soon, too soon. Why? What can we say?

Words fail us, in times like this, but that is not all we have. In light of this utter shock and this cavernous grief, the special musicians for today asked, "Should we play?" "You should play," I said. Garrett was a musician, if we were to silence music... Garrett was kind, and thoughtful, and goofy, and caring, if we were to silence that, if we were to stop being that—how could we? How could we keep from music? How could we keep from goodness? How could we keep from singing? "Above earth's lamentation, through all the tumult and the strife, we hear music ringing." "What, though joys and comforts die? The Lord my Savior liveth. What, though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth."

Darkness has gathered round. It is night here this morning, it is night, but music is ringing, and we are singing. Songs in the night he giveth. We are singing, because the Son of God has also suffered, and was raised. We are singing, because Jesus, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, has gone before us, and before Garrett. We are singing because Christ is Lord of heaven and earth and life and death. Christ is Lord. Amen.