

Jim Gill

August 14, 2016

“Clouds”

Isaiah 5:1-6

Luke 12:49-56 Hebrews 11:29-12:2

PRAYER OF PRAISE

All praise and honor be unto you O God for our faithfulness through the ages. We could offer you nothing were it not for Christ our Redeemer. We could not walk obediently without your Holy Spirit to guide and inspire and strengthen us. We are yours, O God. Glory be to you, our Rock and our Redeemer.

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 5:1-6

Using the image of a vineyard Isaiah continues to warn Israel of what will happen to them if they continue to forsake the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord from Isaiah 5:1-6.

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 12:29-56

Today's message from Hebrews is a continuation from last week's message. Last week we saw how others put their faith to work...how Noah built an ark, how Abraham left home. This morning we read the rest of the list of those who gave their lives for their faith. In our passage from Luke, Jesus spends much of the twelfth chapter of Luke reassuring and encouraging his followers in the face of possible catastrophic circumstance. After spending 45 verses trying to quiet the anxiety of his followers, Jesus tells them that he came to bring fire to the earth. His coming may bring peace of mind, it may bring peace with God, but it will not necessarily bring peace between those who reject him and those who accept him. Instead, his ministry may divide families and pit individual members of households against one another. Will you please stand for the reading of the gospel of our Lord from Luke 12:49-56.

Let us pray. Bless to our hearts the reading of these words. Fire us up so that we may light out world. Lift our drooping heads, O God and strengthen our weak knees. Make straight the ways of the faithful and keep those who trust you from falling so that we may make your love known among the nations and proclaim your peace unto the ends of the earth.

I thank God for clouds. Clouds mean I don't have to water the yard. (After last night I may not need to water for a week!) Clouds bring shade from the August sun. When we see a cloud coming up in the west we know what's going to happen. When we hear a weather report of something in the Gulf we buy up bottled water and stock up on batteries especially on tax free weekend. We can read the weather or heed those who can...then why can't we read the spiritual forecast when Jesus says he came to set the world on fire?

Hindsight is _____20/20. There are consultants who are paid millions of dollars by large corporations to read the times. Consider the prognostications of the following trend predictors.

"Drill for oil? You mean drill into the ground to try and find oil? You're crazy." That's how potential drillers responded to Edwin L. Drake in 1859.

"This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us." Thus read a Western Union internal memo, 1876.

David Sarnoff's associates responded to his to his urgings for investment in the radio in the 1920s. "The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?"

"I'm just glad it'll be Clark Gable who's falling on his face and not Gary Cooper." Gary Cooper said this about his decision not to take the leading role in "Gone With The Wind."

"We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out." Decca Recording Co. rejecting the Beatles, 1962.

"Man will never reach the moon regardless of all future scientific advances." Dr. Lee De Forest, inventor of the vacuum tube and father of television.

I wonder what Dr. De Forest would think today about the icloud!

I suspect his first century audience understood Jesus imagery of fiery rain more readily than we do. We have only a passing acquaintance with the power of fire. We read of forest fires in California or hear the siren of a racing fire truck. Once a church I served held a health fair and we got to see a fire truck up close and personal. We saw all the different kinds of axes and tools they use to get inside burning buildings. I got to try on a real fireman's hat. It was heavy! The truck itself is a thousand gallon tank of water on wheels. What was really impressive to me though was that the fireman was a Volunteer. He had a day job, but he chose to make himself available when there was a need, even using his vacation time to do so. We have firemen dedicated to putting out fires, but Jesus says he came to start them--to rain fire from heaven.

Jesus draws upon an ancient belief that fire was a manifestation of God. Remember Moses and the Burning Bush? Remember the Exodus from Egypt with a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day? Jesus is reminding us of the radical nature of His ministry. He is far more than a gentle Jesus meek and mild. He has come to light a fire under us....to fire us up.

Jesus claims that the gospel is so radical that the world will experience it as fire raining from heaven. Those who follow his teachings, Jesus warns, will be considered revolutionaries. Jesus tells those of us who strive to follow him even today that when his message sinks into our hearts and minds, it can cause trouble in our families. If we choose to follow Christ, we can get in trouble at work. This Gospel may have a negative impact on our friendships if we take our faith seriously.

For the most part, this radical edge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been put on the back burner. Many who now claim Christianity as their faith conceive of Jesus more as the one who came to meet their needs than to fire them up to challenge oppressors. The goal of their faith is to secure contentment and personal security in the here and now ... and entry to heaven in the hereafter. Jesus wasn't given the key to the city. He was taken outside the city and crucified.

All but the apostle John met violent deaths at the hands of those who were outraged at the revolutionary changes they wanted to make both in society and in the lives of individuals. When Pliny was governor of a province in Asia Minor, he wrote a letter to the Roman emperor telling him that he didn't know what these Christians believed exactly but they were the most willful, obstinate, rebellious, disobedient people he had ever encountered. Therefore he had put some of them to death just on general principles.(1)

My, how that differs from the claims the church makes on people's lives today! Instead of high demands and radical changes, we think the purpose of our faith is to make us feel good about ourselves. Rather than an institution inciting revolutionary change, the community today wants the church to be a well-maintained, quiet presence that never threatens property values.

Some people catch the vision that there is more to the good life than just acquiring more and more. Some realize that their Christian faith calls them to do something for others, rather than just feeling good about themselves. Sometimes people decide to go to seminary rather than law school. Some decide to pursue a Master of Divinity rather than a Master of Business Administration. Some decide to join a cloud of witnesses on earth.

This week grandstands have been filled with supporters cheering their athletes on. Last night Michael Phelps won his 23rd gold medal. We are especially proud of our local Simones': Simone Briles won her 2nd and Simone Manuel won her 2nd. There have been clouds of witnesses watching the Olympics.

The clouds of witnesses in Hebrews 12:1 also bring encouragement. Like a cloud that showers rain to nurture the earth and bring new life, the cloud of witnesses in the grandstand of our heaven are there to cheer us on, to shower us with courage, to serve as examples of faith lived out the way that Noah, Abraham and

Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel and Leah, Moses and Zipporah, Joshua, Rahab, as well as the disciples of Jesus and eventually the apostle Paul. Some of us might add in that cloud of witnesses folks who didn't make it into Hebrews 11, yet rightly deserve a spot, our loved ones, family and friends, who have gone before us. Last Thursday was my mother's birthday. In 2010 she joined my dad who took his seat in heaven's grandstand 1990.

This week I bought a C.D. by Steve Wariner. I had never heard his music but I had read about him in as being an influence on Brad Paisley in Brad's autobiography. The second song on that C.D. is, "There's Holes in the Floor of Heaven." The first verse talks about a 7 year old boy whose grandmother died. His mamma's words of encouragement to him in his sorrow were,

"There holes in the floor of heaven. And her tears are pouring down.
That's how you now she's watching wishing she could be here now
and sometimes if you're lonely just remember she can see,
there's holes in the floor of heaven and she's watching over you and me.

We are not alone in our faith journey. No matter how discouraging some of the events of our lives are, we can make it through encouraged by the example of those who have gone before us. We can draw strength from clouds of witnesses who live their faith even in our times. Clouds cannot only rain water and fire, they can also rain encouragement and cheers.

Benjamin Weir was a Presbyterian missionary in Beirut, Lebanon. Weir, who with his wife Carol served as missionaries there for nearly 30 years, was kidnapped off the streets of Beirut on May 8, 1984. The kidnapping was done by an Islamic fundamentalist group, Islamic Jihad, that later evolved into Hezbollah. He was held hostage for sixteen months. During that time he was locked in a barren room and unable to see another human being. His hands were manacled. He was blindfolded most of the time. Even when the blindfold was taken off he had no view from his tiny cell. But this did not defeat him.

An electric light cord dangled from the ceiling. The bulb had been stripped off, leaving three fragile filament wires exposed. For Weir, these wires became a symbol of hope. They reminded him of the life-giving fingers of God reaching down to Adam in the Sistine Chapel. "Here God was reaching toward me," he would write later, "reminding me, saying, 'You're alive. You are mine; I've made you and called you into being for a divine purpose.'"

And he could see the horizontal slats of the shutters outside the French doors. There were 120 of them. What could those horizontal pieces of wood stand for? He decided these represented that great cloud of witnesses we are read about in this morning's passage, champions of our faith past and present, who through times of trial have observed the faithfulness of God.

Benjamin's eyes lighted on two white circles near the ceiling, one on the right-hand wall, the other on the left. In reality, these were plastic covers for electrical connections, but in Weir's imagination they were something else. They were ears--the ears of God. "The Lord hears the groaning of the saints," Benjamin Weir remembered.

As he reminded himself of all the blessings of our faith, he was greatly encouraged and spiritually strengthened. By the end of the day, he said, he was humming, "Count your many blessings, name them one by one." (1)

The guards outside Weir's room could only see a naked wire, a French door with slats and two plastic covers in the ceiling, but this Presbyterian missionary could see much, much more. They were a part of his cloud of witnesses. He could see the hand of God at work in his life, even in these dismal circumstances. And so Ben Weir came out of his hostage experience stronger than he went in. Ben drew strength from his cloud.

We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses in heaven encouraging us. Whether it is a crisis with our health, a crisis within our family, a failure on the job--whatever it might be we can make it. We can go on. We follow a long line of people who have persevered and been victorious. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses on earth... we don't have to wait to go to heaven to join the cloud.

While it is true that we have a great cloud of witnesses in heaven cheering us on, those who are the victims of injustice could greatly benefit be a cloud of witnesses on earth who will testify to the injustice they see and work to rid the world of those who oppress those who are weak and helpless.

On Saturday August 27th the Baytown Police and the Harris County Sherriff's Department are going to hold a Town Hall at the Baytown Community Center in the Tejas Room from 10-1pm at 2400 Market Street. It's called "Let's Talk Again." A few weeks ago I told you about the first one I attended in McNair. At that meeting besides the photographer and reporter from the Baytown Sun, the assistant Police Chief and one of the Sheriffs, I was the only Anglo-American in the room. If we are going to understand and support one another we need to **Talk Again**. I invite you to come with me to this one so we can better understand and better address the issues we are facing in our area and our world. Come join the cloud.

God's got us surrounded. We are surrounded in heaven and we are surrounded on earth. God has great things for us to do. God wants us to surround others and to "join the cloud."

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let us also lay aside every weight that so easily entangles us and let us run with

endurance, the race that is set before us-fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of faith. Who for the JOY set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

I thank God for clouds.

Let us pray. God of all knowledge, before whom nations rise and pass away, we bow down in awe of your infinite wisdom. You discern our inmost thoughts, sensing our needs. You re the quickening fire of judgment that renders us liable for our deeds and misdeed. Yours is the reconciling Spirit which can lift us from the depths of sin and failure. You set us aright, so that we may walk in your mercy. For this and more we give you thanks.

God of compassion we pray for those whose spirits re crushed by the weighty of their afflictions. They cry in their anguish that there can be no God. Draw near to them during their time of trial, and deliver them form the abyss of despair. Help us to be for them a source of encouragement and support, so that they may once more trust your promises. Hear us as we lift them to you by name.

We pray for those devastated by flooding in Baton Rouge. We pray for the people fleeing fires in California. We pray for people everywhere who live in fear who need faith and encouragement from clouds of witnesses.

These things we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

1. Pliny, Letters X, p. 96.
2. Benjamin M. and Carol Weir, *Hostage Bound, Hostage Free* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1987).