

THE ORIGINAL CLOUD

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

***“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...”***

Hebrews 12:1

So, did you hear the one about the little boy who goes up to his father and asks him, “Daddy, what’s a cloud made of?”

“That’s easy, son. Google, Amazon, Netflix...”

(Sorry.) In case that wasn’t bad enough for you, there’s the cartoon that’s been making the rounds on social media. Moses is standing there on Mount Sinai, stone tablets in hand, looking up to the heavens. The caption says: “Technically, Moses was the first one to download to his tablet from the cloud.”

OK, my apologies for that one, too. Those are just two of many lame jokes out there about cloud computing....

...Which is kind of remarkable when you think about it, because it was not that many years ago that none of us had even heard of storing our data in the cloud.

I looked it up on Wikipedia.com — which, by the way, exists in the cloud — and learned that true cloud computing began in the year 2000. The Internet’s

been around a few years longer than that, but until 2000 there really weren't viable ways for ordinary people to store their digital photos and music anywhere but on the hard drive of their computer, or on something like a floppy disk. (*Remember those, O digital pioneers? Gone but not forgotten!*)

Nowadays, all kinds of important data live outside our computers, tablets, smartphones and all the rest. We may carry around copies of our photos from last Christmas, but if we lose our device, it's no big deal: because there's always the cloud version to rely on.

My son-in-law, Ryan, helps maintain the cloud. He's a software engineer who works for a company that manufactures computer storage devices. I don't begin to understand what he does, but I do know he and his team write software that runs the storage media embedded in giant computers that are lined up, row upon row, in secure storage facilities. If you thought the cloud was made up of millions of tiny droplets of water vapor that form a puffy white shape in the sky, you'd be wrong: this cloud is made of semiconductors.

But the cloud I want to talk with you about today is nothing like that. It goes back way, way beyond the year 2000. The Bible talks about it: in the letter to the Hebrews, to be exact. Chapter 12, verse 1 reads:

“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...”

A great “cloud of witnesses” surrounds us, says this anonymous apostle.

And who *are* these witnesses, this vast cloud of people who surround us on every side? The verses that precede this one lay it all out for us.

The apostle writes to us of faith: faith held by Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Joseph, Moses and the whole company of wandering Israelites. Even the prostitute Rahab deserves a mention: that colorful Mata Hari character who helps Joshua fight the Battle of Jericho.

There’s a whole list of other, unnamed people as well: people who suffered mightily to keep the faith. Some of these...

...suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 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 — of whom the world was not worthy.

It’s a cloud of witnesses: these martyrs of the faith bore courageous witness, in their time, to God’s bottomless justice and love. They bear witness still, as they live on in this mysterious cloud that is eternal life.

I like to think of it as a bright cloud: something like the Milky Way — which isn’t actually a cloud at all, of course, but thousands upon thousands of

distant stars, stretched across the heavens on a clear night. Claire and I like to go stargazing near our Adirondacks camp, where we go on vacation each summer. There's so little ambient light up there — light pollution from streetlights and headlights and all the rest — that if you choose a night when the moon has shrunk to but the tiniest of crescents, then the bright band of the Milky Way glows with a luminosity all its own.

Most of the stars that make up the Milky Way you can't pick out with the naked eye. If there were but one of those distant stars in the sky, you'd barely notice it at all: but there are so many of them, their collective glow is really quite striking.

That's the sort of thing the writer of Hebrews is on about, as he lists those anonymous martyrs who suffered in such colorful — and yes, disturbing — ways. "Time would fail me to tell of their names," the author says — but I have a feeling he doesn't even know most of their names. He just knows they are many. They are those "of whom the world was not worthy."

So, why bother to talk about this great cloud of witnesses? The writer of this letter has a very specific purpose. You have to go back many verses, long before the beginning of today's reading, to find out his reason: the situation that led him

to put pen to paper.

In chapter 10, verses 35 and 36, he writes:

Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

The letter to the Hebrews is written to Christian believers who are suffering for their faith. This is a church undergoing hard persecution. The writer of this letter — their pastor, in modern terms — is wishing for them the spiritual gift of endurance, so they can get through this season of heartache, and may one day bask in God’s glory: in this life or the next.

So, what do you say to someone who’s suffering? Lots of us struggle to find an answer to that question. Let’s say you’ve got a friend or family member who’s in the hospital. You know things aren’t going so well, medically. The doctors can surely help, but they just can’t make it all better.

You’re thinking about making a visit to the hospital, but you hesitate. You don’t know what to say. You want to find some pearl of wisdom you can share — some golden words you can lay on your friend or family member — but you’re coming up blank.

There are all those familiar platitudes:

- **“Everything happens for a reason.”**

- **“God never gives us more than we can handle.”**
- **“Just hang in there, things will get better.”**
- **“Keep thinking positive thoughts.”**
- **“I know exactly how you feel.”** (No you don’t: no one knows *exactly* how another person feels, ever!)

None of these sayings are likely to bring much comfort. They’re the kind of thing we say to another person to make *ourselves* feel better.

Actually, the best thing to do is just be there. You’ve heard the old saying, “95% of life is showing up?” That’s especially true of visiting someone who’s suffering. You don’t need to say much of anything. You don’t need to stay long, either — and probably shouldn’t. But the mere fact of your presence says more than mere words ever could.

When you spend quality time with another person who’s suffering — when you practice the ministry of presence — you take your place among the crowd of witnesses. You’re just one among many: but your presence reminds your friend that there are others: a great many others.

There’s more, of course, to the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews than just being there. It matters to the writer of this letter — and to his readers — that the

believers whose exploits he recounts are all people who have themselves suffered.

Now that, at first, may not sound like it's very comforting. Wouldn't a person undergoing suffering just want to think of something else: to think happy thoughts? Maybe for a little while that could be true. A little distraction is sometimes welcome. But far more healing comes from the community of people who are facing similar challenges.

That's the power behind a good support group. Years ago, when I was undergoing chemotherapy for non-Hodgkin lymphoma, and for a period of time after my treatment, I attended weekly meetings of a local cancer support group in the town where I lived. I have to say I was a bit skeptical, at first. I'd never seen myself as a support group type of person. I was a pastor, after all. My job was to help others, not receive help myself. I was supposed to have all the answers and dispense them beneficently to others.

Yet, as one round of chemo succeeded the other, and my hair fell out on exactly the day they predicted it would, and I grew steadily weaker coping with the side effects, I felt my mood sliding into a dark place. And so, one day, I dragged my sorry self to one of the support group meetings.

Immediately I felt glad I did. It wasn't long before I wondered why I'd waited so long to show up there. It was only a few blocks from my house, a lot

closer than my oncologist's office, where I went for my chemo infusions and all manner of blood draws in between. It wasn't that I picked up a lot of tips from my fellow cancer survivors about how to cope with side effects, and how to navigate the medical system — although I did. It was something harder to put into words. It occurs to me now, so many years later, that the little cancer support group was an outpost of the great cloud of witnesses.

I learned a little phrase there, that I also heard in a few other places. The phrase is “Cancer Underground.” If you're a survivor — of that disease, or anything else — you may know what I mean by that. By virtue of the diagnosis we'd received, we'd all been initiated into membership in a shadowy organization to which none of us had ever applied, nor ever dreamed we'd belong to. But all of us had experiences of encountering others in various places who, learning of what we'd been going through, made eye contact in a significant way, or found some other way of saying “me too,” that established an immediate connection.

Sometimes that was all that was necessary to bring comfort. Just receive the high sign. Acknowledge the password. Know you're not alone.

I think that's what the author of Hebrews is doing as he weaves that great tapestry of saints and martyrs, displaying it to his beleaguered congregation. Sure,

some of the details are grim — stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword — but that doesn't matter. Most of all, the people reading this letter want to know they're not alone. That there are others who speak their language, who share their pain, who revel in the joy of small victories and the weariness of repeated setbacks.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and theologian, is one of my spiritual guides. I was reading — actually, re-reading — one of his books on my vacation. It's called *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. In it, he has a little something to say that reminds me of the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews:

Communities and commitment can form around suffering much more than around how wonderful or superior we are. Just compare the real commitment to one another, to the world, and to truth in “happy clappy religion” with the deep solidarity of families at the time of a tragic death or among hospice workers and their clients. There is a strange and even wonderful communion in real human pain, actually much more than in joy, which is too often manufactured and passing. In one sense, pain's effects are not passing, and pain is less commonly manufactured. Thus it is a more honest doorway into lasting communion than even happiness.¹

Of all people, we Christians ought to know that. We're the people who, when we gather around this table for the Lord's Supper — as we do on the first

¹Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2011), Kindle location: 2,311.

Sunday of each month — share the words, “This is my body, broken for you; this is my blood, shed for you.” That puts it right out there with brutal honesty, doesn’t it? If the founder of our faith, our Lord Jesus Christ, could not escape the cross, then how in this life can any of us expect to escape this thing called suffering? Our savior hands out no free passes, when it comes to that. Remember, he’s the one who said “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

The message of Hebrews is all about perseverance: and how does it make any sense to talk about perseverance unless there’s something to persevere through? It’s only natural to fear suffering, and to hope for a long, healthy, prosperous and entirely pain-free life, but face it: the chances that such a dream will come true for any of us are just about nil. Better to just acknowledge that misconception for the fantasy it is, and keep an eye out for signs of that cloud of witnesses, both living and dead. They have a way of finding us when we most need them. They have a way of directing us to the God of peace.

The hymn we’re going to sing next — new words to a familiar tune — was written by a friend of mine, the Rev. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. She’s a prolific writer of contemporary hymn texts. This one — based on this very passage from

Hebrews — she wrote for the 300th anniversary of the Presbytery of Philadelphia — the oldest presbytery in our denomination. That birthday party took place in 2006. Lamington Church is about 20 years shy, now, of our own 300th birthday, and — while we're not quite there yet — I think you'll see in these words a reminder of that original cloud of faithful believers here in this place, whose witness continues even today.

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