

## *Communion of Saints*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Isaiah 25:6-9** On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.<sup>7</sup> And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations;<sup>8</sup> he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.<sup>9</sup> It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Hebrews 11:29-32** 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>NRS</sup> **Hebrews 12:1-2** 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,<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.

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The eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews is one of the most stirring passages in scripture. It begins with a definition of faith. You have most likely heard the definition expressed this way. <sup>NRS</sup> **Hebrews 11:1** Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. That phrasing may not be as strong and as clear as would be helpful. Assurance sounds a lot like reassurance, something that's probable but not absolutely certain. If someone says, "I assure you that this car is in good shape," you know what they want you to believe, but you may not feel one hundred percent certain of their claim. The word conviction may also be a little confusing. Conviction is one of the possible outcomes of a trial, but that doesn't shed any light here. The word also means personal principles - as when we say, "I knew I shouldn't have gone against my convictions on this issue." So, saying that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen can leave things a little murky, a little iffy. The New International Version is a lot clearer. <sup>NIV</sup> **Hebrews 11:1** "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Sure. Certain. Those are rock solid words. There's nothing wishy-washy about this statement. I can't see or prove God's existence, but I'm certain that God is present. God's goodness and love gives me hope and that hope is confident and sure.

And then the writer of the letter to the Hebrews begins this beautiful litany. Over and over people from Israel's past are remembered, listed, and honored. By faith, Abel . . ." By faith, Abraham. . ." By faith, Noah. . ." By faith, Moses . . ." on and on the list goes, naming men - and women. Naming major figures from Israel's history - and others who get far less ink on the pages of scripture. The proclamation is that each one, great and small, women and men, had faith. They were sure about their hope and certain about even that which they could not see.

By faith, this certainty, each one in this litany acted. Their faith wasn't a matter of believing. They aren't praised for thinking correct thoughts. It wasn't simply a matter of believing in one God instead of worshiping many pagan idols. By faith Noah built an ark because he was certain that a flood like had never been seen was going to happen. By faith, filled with the sure hope in God's promises, Abraham set off to only God knew where, certain

about a land he hadn't seen. By faith, Moses set out into the badlands of the Sinai peninsula, sure in his hope, certain in even what he couldn't see or imagine.

But not everybody in this litany is a major leader. They weren't all courageous, or prominent, or even reputable. Take Gideon, for instance. He was a farmer, not a soldier. He was scared of the Midianites so he threshed his wheat out of sight, down in the wine press. An angel appeared to him and hailed him as a valiant warrior and said, "God is with you." Gideon said, "Excuse me, but if God is with us, why do we have all these problems. I think God has deserted us." Gideon was dubious. First he sought confirmation that the voice he heard was God's voice. Twice he asked God to confirm the plan that had been laid out. Gideon didn't come easily to faith. But once he did, he never looked back. Gideon was far from perfect, but by faith he rid the Israelites of occupation forces. With only 300 men Gideon drove out the foreign occupying force that numbered in the thousands - and the land enjoyed rest and peace for forty years, until Gideon died.

A couple of generations before Gideon, there was a judge and prophetess named Deborah. In a patriarchic world, it was unusual for a woman to be a judge, a leader of the people. She was also a prophetess, a preacher, one who declared the word of God to the people. Over three thousand years ago, there was a woman of God leading the children of God. She summoned a man named Barak and told him to raise an army to drive out the Canaanite army that had oppressed them for the past 20 years. Barak said that he didn't know how to choose the day when the Lord would be with them in battle, but he knew that Deborah would know God's will. Barak was humble about his own abilities but he was sure of what he hoped for and certain of what he himself couldn't see. By faith, Barak drove the oppressive Canaanites out of the land.

Rahab had a house on the walls of Jericho. She took in travelers to lodge there. Besides providing room and board, Rahab plied an old trade that is held in low esteem. She took in two spies that Joshua had sent ahead. This was before the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into Canaan. She hadn't seen the Hebrews cross the Red Sea, but she had heard. Now, the Hebrews were about to enter the land where she lived. She was certain that God was with the Hebrews, even though she hadn't been there at the Red Sea. She was sure of her hope for her family. So she helped the spies escape and at the battle for Jericho, Rahab, her parents, and her siblings were saved by her faith.

Humble Barak, reluctant Gideon, and a woman of low esteem. An unlikely trio of heroes for the people of God. They were insignificant in the commonness and lowliness of their place in life. But they were sure of what they hoped for and certain of that which they couldn't see. and their faith empowered them to do daring things, audacious acts, actions with huge consequences. These were not people without faults and flaws. They weren't angelic beings of holy perfection. But they were faithful people who acted by faith - and they're an example for those who come after them. They were faithful saints.

The writer of Hebrews lists Barak, Gideon, and Rahab along with Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Noah, Jacob, Joseph, and others and calls them all heroes of the faith. They are, the writer says, a great cloud of witnesses that surround us. That cloud has grown bigger and bigger with time. Add the names of Peter and Paul, James and John, Mary, Martha, Susanna, and Priscilla. Add the scholars and Reformers: Origen, Peter Abelard, William of Occum, John Calvin, Menno Simmons. William Wilberforce, William Penn. None of them perfect. All of them flawed. All of them saints.

Today is All Saints Day. It's a day to recall all of the saints who have gone before us. It's a day to reflect on the great cloud of witnesses, the famous and the unknown, the ancient and the recent. Over the past three years that I have lived among you, we have said goodbye to brothers and sisters of this community of faith known as First Presbyterian of Thomasville. They were as

varied as the list of saints in Hebrews eleven. None were perfect. All were flawed. And they all lived by faith. Reflect on your memories of those you knew as I call their names. Bill Perry. Olive Marie Roadhouse. Bill Forbis. Marie Crews. Jo Hodges. Kermit Cloniger. Buddy Harrison. Estelle Brooks.

“The communion of the saints.” That’s one of those churchy sounding phrases that we use, but we probably don’t give a lot of thought to what it means. We refer to gathering at the table and eating the bread and drinking the cup by various names. We call it Eucharist, which means “thanksgiving” - and it **is** a thanksgiving meal. We call it the Lord’s Supper - and it **is** the meal that he instituted - and where we dine spiritually with him and with all the saints in heaven and on earth. And so, we also call it communion, a word that speaks of sharing, participation, intimate spiritual relationship, professing the same faith, holding something in common, and being in community.

We sing the lines from the hymn, *The Church’s One Foundation*,  
 “Yet she on earth has union  
 With God the Three in One  
 And mystic sweet communion  
 With those whose rest is won.”

This is exactly the communion of the saints that is being described in the first verse of Hebrews chapter twelve. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses”

Did you hear the word “therefore”? Therefore. That means this causes or this leads to something else. “Therefore, since we are in mystic sweet communion, let us also lay aside everything that holds us back. Let us set aside the sin that clings to us, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” By faith, the saints, ancient and recent, acted on their sure hope and the certainty of what they couldn’t see. The writer of Hebrews isn’t just reminiscing about the wonderful dear folks who have died. This text isn’t a smaltzy tour of the good old days. No, it’s a challenge and a call to action. These heroes of the past, great and small, male and female, **acted** on their faith. By faith they persevered and did God’s work. And the writer says, we must do the same!

In the years to come, will we look back and be able to say that we had perseverance? Will we recall how we were sure in our hope? That we were certain of God’s good future even when we couldn’t see it? In the years beyond that, will others look back in admiration and find inspiration in our perseverance during these hard times? Will they want to copy our faith, our stamina, our generosity. Will they rejoice that they gather around the Lord’s table in communion with us? Amen