

MESSAGE: “Cloud of Witnesses”

Text: Hebrews 12:1-3

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to focus the spotlight of eternal witness upon current runners of the faith to the glory of God.

Introduction

Every once-in-a-while, a cinematic feature film focuses a spotlight on an historical event, bringing it to life for a generation. *Saving Private Ryan* was such a film for me. Some of it is difficult to watch, for it graphically portrays the formidable assault that Allied servicemen endured as they landed on the beaches of Normandy in June of 1944. The plot follows eight men of the 2nd Ranger Battalion who risk their lives to retrieve Private Ryan, whose three brothers were killed in action during a single day of combat. During the mission, several of the eight perish. Before the story unfolds, we see Private Ryan, advanced in age, visiting the graves of those who died to save his life. Reduced to tears, he desperately seeks reassurance from his wife, needing to know that his life counted, that it was somehow worthy of the courageous, yet costly sacrifices made in his behalf.

To be candid, every one of us owes such a debt—to those who shaped our values, to those who sacrificed for our freedoms, to those who denied themselves to give us a better start, and certainly to the One who lay down his life so that we might have life in spiritual abundance.

My great-grandparents, parents of my paternal grandfather, whose ministry inspired my own, died of measles in Langdon, Vermont in January of 1913 within one week of each other. The Bellows Falls paper at the time wrote the following about my great-grandfather:

“It becomes our duty to chronicle the death of James W. Bascom which occurred at eleven o’clock Monday fore noon, thus leaving a family of five young orphan children, three of whom are victims of the disease—the daughter critically ill. Mr. Bascom was one of the most honorable, useful and efficient citizens of the town holding offices of trust faithfully, as his father did before him.”

Having heard this statement, you now know virtually everything I know about my great-grandfather. I know how he died. I know he was respected. But who was he? How has he influenced my life as one who died exactly 50 years before my birth? These are questions I cannot answer, nor, perhaps, can you from your family context.

There is a saying printed on many gravestones that goes, “One life to live; t’will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.” It is startling to consider how quickly the

details of one's life are forgotten by those on earth. It is comforting to know that all things continue with God.

As we reflect this All Saints Sunday on the lives of saints who have preceded us, it is tempting to feel that they are a lost phenomenon. Where are the saints of today? Are you a saint?

Elijah felt like he was the only saint left in the Israel of his day. He cried out, "Destroy me Lord, for I, even I, am the only one left!" God responded, "There are 7,000 left in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal." In a society bereft of righteousness, true heroes endured.

True heroes remain today, as well, but few receive fame or notoriety. Our modern-day saints, as perhaps they have always been, are people who live quiet lives of integrity—effecting change and healing where they can, but never receiving much glory or even credit for it. Unless their deeds are written down and recorded, they are unknown to their great-grandchildren. They may be unknown, but their example continues to influence the lives of descendants for many generations.

The faithful saints cited in Hebrews 11 are commended for doing radical things for God, going to lands far from home, facing death with fortitude, opposing formidable resistance, trusting for resurrection, identifying with God's people at great personal risk. These are the substance of sainthood. We live in a broken, hurting world. Difficult as it is, we must develop the ability to speak out against injustice. We must champion that which is right in God's eyes regardless of public opinion. We must find the capacity to search for hidden, sometimes imperceptible opportunities in life's tragic circumstances.

You and I are the saints of God today. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, cheering us on. We are the players out on the field. The goals we seek are not money, fame or power. We seek justice and mercy, peace and forgiveness, wholeness and love. We can go the distance! We can lay aside the weight of sin and run with perseverance the race set before us.

Jesus endured the cross, disregarding its shame, for the joy of sitting at God's right hand. We, too, will face a cross of some kind—perhaps more than one, but Christ will never desert us. We will not fail the test, because God has planted unfailing love in our heart. One day, we, too, will join the great cloud of witnesses. On that day our joy will be complete, and we will hear the words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." Then we will know, and know full well, our lives made a difference in the kingdom of God.