

November 5, 2017  
All Saints' Sunday  
Christ Church, Exeter  
The Rev. Mark Pendleton

### A Great Cloud of Witnesses

A few weeks back I was a witness to a car accident. I had just loaded up my pick-up truck one morning to take my trash and recycling to the transfer station – like any good NH resident – when on my way I saw a car weaving back and forth to both sides of the road. It was not going fast at all, but slowly driving erratically. Something seemed very wrong, so I followed behind at a short distance. I became more concerned when the car drove up onto the sidewalk. My first reaction was to try to drive alongside and honk my horn to get the driver's attention. Not soon after I started honking, the driver drove head-on to an oncoming car. Fortunately, this all happened at such slow speed that no one was hurt. The man in the car that was hit was quite stunned and angry to have seen a car coming at him at such a slow speed and then hit him -- so he started to get out to yell at the erratic driver. I quickly got out of my car to meet him: "I think the driver is confused" I said. "I don't think he knew what he was doing." The driver, I saw, was an older gentleman, with a walker in the back seat and I began to ask him questions he clearly not aware of where he was. I convinced him to hand me his keys until the Police came. My hunch is that that was the last morning drive the gentleman would be taking. Clearly it could have been much worse. Since I was the only witness to the accident to see what happened, I was asked to stay behind and wrote up an account for the police report.

A witness is someone who sees an event take place – sometimes a crime or an accident. When it comes to faith, a witness can be and see much more. The Risen Jesus in Act 1:8 told his disciples that they "would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." This is the grounding for our parish vision to serve the local and global community. Not either or, but both/and. Near and far.

Our first reading is from Joshua. Moses, the great liberator of the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt, was dead. We've been reading about Moses for weeks now. About his birth, his rise to influence, his growing awareness of the suffering of his people. The Burning Bush. Crossing through the Red Sea. Receiving the Ten Commandments. 40 long years of wandering with some grumbling and tired people who were tempted to think that the old life had to have been better than what they were experiencing in the wilderness.

There was no such thing or concept as a Bucket List in the Bible – the list that some people nearing a certain time in their life make to list the places they'd like to see and the things they'd still like to do. Someone once described to me the 3 stages of retirement: go-go; slow-go; and no go. One would think that if he could, Moses would have liked to have led his people over the finish line. But he was a no-go. It would not be.

It would be Joshua. How would you like to be the one to follow Moses? Even the Lord seemed to know there might be P.R. problems. The Lord said to Joshua, "This day I will

begin to exalt you in the sight of Israel, so that they may know that I will be you as I was with Moses.” Thanks Lord. I suppose that was a confidence booster. Yet as mighty a warrior as Joshua would become, Moses was never forgotten – his legacy loomed large.

Perhaps you have heard the phrase 'Standing on the shoulders of giants'? It is attributed to Isaac Newton – who is known by lore for a certain apple that fell from a tree and caused him to consider a little thing we call gravity. The phrase is believed to go even further back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century to John of Salisbury who wrote: "We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours."

I am drawn to this image and idea of being raised up by others – allowing their stature and experiences – their pains and hopes – to add to our own. Allowing us to see more and farther out into the world.

This is why we need and cherish All Saints' so much. It is not primarily about the giants of the faith: those who have Saint as a first name (St. Patrick, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Mary) and who have cleared the bar of holiness by acts of healing and mercy. It is about God's holy giants and lesser giants -- the known and the forgotten.

I had the opportunity last Sunday to visit an Anglican church in Kingston, Jamaica and after the 2 ½ hour 8:00 a.m. service, visit a church-run home for girls who had been severely traumatized and abused. The woman who ran the home was with the girls on a rainy Sunday morning and encouraged them to stand next to her, holding their hand, as she coaxed them to introduce themselves to this group of strangers. More than the rector who ran the parish, the woman who mothered these young girls back to life and dignity was and is the saint whose light was clear to see.

Celebrating All Saints' allows us to lift up what we call the communion of the saints, (BCP) which is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.

It is like Old Home Week for the church. Everyone, the living and the dead, gets to celebrate what being a child of God is all about. Being formed, created, loved into being by a Creator who is with us if and whenever we lose our way or make a mess of things. I so like the prayer we use for birthdays. That is what God does: Strengthens us when we stand. Comforts us when we get discouraged or sorrowful. Raises us up if we fall and abides with us all the days of our lives.

A witness is someone who sees an event take place. I hope you hear these words in the prayer we will pray today at communion: “for in the multitude of the saints, you have surrounded us with a great cloud of witnesses, that we might rejoice in their fellowship and run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

We are surrounded by a great cloud of God's people who will not allow anyone's life to be forgotten. Anyone's experience to go unseen or unnoticed. No one's life falls between the cracks of this big sometimes anonymous world.

Pay attention when clouds get mentioned in church and in the Bible – they usually mean that God is near.

What do we know about clouds anyway?

I had to update my phone a few weeks back because my old one wouldn't charge anymore and the salesperson asked me if I had updated my data on the cloud. I really did not want to come across as clueless, but I finally surrendered and said: "I have no idea." The cloud, as some of you more tech savvy people know, is the term for a collection of networks and computer servers somewhere – but not in the sky -- where data – such as the photos on my phone I so wanted to recover – is stored.

What I remember of my childhood when a cloud was just a cloud. My friends and I spent a lot of time looking up into the sky at clouds. We would often lay down on the grass in the backyard and look up into the sky at the clouds and challenge each other to find people and objects in the clouds and be the first to point them out. Hours on end it seemed.

One Christmas years back my children were each given *The Book of Clouds* by John A. Day by their grandparents. Dr. Day is a world expert in clouds and known as 'the Cloudman.' Before his gets into the heavy physics of clouds, he offers up ten reasons to look up. Among them.

Clouds are the greatest free show on earth.

Through there are four basic kinds, clouds are never exactly the same.

Many skies are simply beautiful to behold – the graduations of light and color in the late afternoon or the early morning hours.

They are a billboard of coming attractions. One can get a real sense when a storm is coming.

Clouds makes us more connected to nature.

Clouds are made up of water and a constant reminder of how important water is to life.

Cloud watching is an antidote for boredom. They are ever changing.

They are simply a magic show. They are mystery. Where do they come from and where do they go?

There are moments when we may need our own top ten reasons to look up. Or believe again. Trust. Forgive. As we look up and out, we are a part of a whole big family of God that is a part of you and me.

All Saints' is a day to remember those who have died over the last year. In the BCP the question is asked: Why do we pray for the dead? The answer: "We pray for them, because we still hold them in our love, and because we trust that in God's presence those who have

chosen to serve him will grow in his love, until they see him as he is." So today we will remember and pray for Ethel, Burt, Chris, Elsie, Birk and others known to you.

I think ol' John of Salisbury had it right 800 years ago. This great cloud of witnesses, these saints of yesterday and today allow us to see more. To dream bigger dreams. To see farther and wider. They raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours."

Yes, Moses was a hard act to follow. But we're not asked to be Moses, or Frances or Mother Theresa. We're asked to be who God made us, fully alive and a part of the family of God.