

“Reprise—Our Friends in the Balcony”
Genesis 12:1-4a, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
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I have been working on ... wondering about ... and struggling with what to say today. I’ve talked with a number of people. What would you say after twenty years preaching in one place?

Some said, “make it your best ever!” I see the problem in that. Other’s suggested “the best of...”, others suggested quotes from here and there. You know things like, “If you don’t know where you are going any road will get you there.” Or, “Things are always more complicated than they first appear.” Or, “Startle us oh Lord, startle us with the wild improbability of what we say we believe,” Or, “You warm and wonderful child of God.”

My good friend Jerry Dean and one of the “four horseman” three of whom are seated right down front this morning (it is what we call our study and golf group, if you wonder why that name then you didn’t take enough Bible study courses with me!) Jerry Dean suggested something that had been meaningful—a favorite theme—what you heard from Genesis 12 and Hebrews 11.

Like an old friend—like “Come Before Winter” or “Standing on Holy Ground” we preachers have sermons that we work and re-work trying to get it just right or fit the situation or just because we can’t get over the idea.

The book of Hebrews—whoever wrote it—has this wonderful roll call of the saints—and in the middle of it is this half verse that says, “Like a cloud of witnesses they look on to see how we will run our race on earth.” I have talked from time to time about our balcony people, the people we have self-selected to be our role models and mentors, I have said if only these walls could talk having heard over 165 years of worship and absorbed so much they become these walls like our balcony people too.

I first heard the idea of “Balcony People” and no I am not referring to the people who regularly sit in the balcony on Sunday morning or the people who are up there today—though they are nice looking people aren’t they! Turn around and take a look if you wish. The idea was brought to me four decades ago now by Carlyle Marney one of the great preachers of the 20th century.

Marney made the point that all of us have balcony people. These are people that we choose. People in our balcony are our mentors, our models, our examples who inspire us and call us to the upward way. Maybe it was a teacher who saw something in you that you didn’t even see in yourself. I had a tough time in third grade; the teacher was a little too cranky and knew my extended family a little too well. But my fourth grade teacher was a saint. Mrs. Anderson is the one who planted the idea of loving history in me. She is one of my balcony people.

Faculty members Harold Scott at Pittsburgh Seminary and Gordon Jackson are in my balcony. They both didn't give up on me in seminary even when I had given up. When I was thinking about taking a job as Dean of Students at a small college one of them said to me, "Glenn, I see you going places but not to that place."

You all have them, your balcony people, your individual heroes, the ones you have admired and who have helped to shape your life. Think of the people you have loved and treasured, both within your present friends and family and then with those you can no longer see. Pick a certain few for whom you're grateful and admire. But then comes the crunching questions, "What is it about them that makes you love them so?"

You work your mind and memory. What is it about their countenance which gives them that honored placed? They can draw you out, of course, but how and where can they add to what you long to be? First, I think about my parents and my family. My parents gave their all to me. How are you with family, returning love which first was given to you?

Then I think about some others who gave me a better goal to follow. There is the person who gave you your first job. The preacher who tried to teach me what the Bible means when it says, "Greater love has no person than this: that a person lay down their life for their friends." How are you with friends—in continuing to return past interest and favors?

And then I think about some others too, who when I needed help, were there to give me strength and encouragement. Why did they do it, I don't know, perhaps the providence of God, or time and change, perhaps a bit of both. So, how are you in reaching out to individual persons, young and old alike, who need your encouragement more than your success? Your child, your wife or husband, some neighbor or employee. We live, if we live well, inspired by the best ones we have met and our measure must be against our mighty heroes.

And that brings us back to Hebrews. Why do you think the writer wrote these words? "Now, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Why was it important for him to define faith and then go back and list all of these examples of faithful people? No one knows for sure but I would suggest two things.

First, the people to whom this letter was written were anxious about something. Persecution in Rome was being reported. Maybe they thought they were going to be next. "Do not worry, instead of worrying pray-letting God know your concerns." (Philippians 4:6-7) Jesus told his friends one day. Second, the people to whom the letter was written were getting sloppy about their faith. They weren't going to worship like they used to. They were not keeping up with their responsibilities in the church. They were slacking off in giving. They seemed aimless. Once they had been going strong, now they were going nowhere fast.

What do you do when your life is like that ... all bogged down, going nowhere fast? The author of Hebrews says when things are like that, you remember. You remember Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Joshua and Gideon and Deborah and Samson and Samuel and David and Esther and Daniel. You remember them because they are role models of faith; they are witnesses to us about living faithfully. Their faith transcended the ordinary. Their faith enabled

them to look past what their eyes could see, so that they saw the vision that God held out for them. Beyond giving them emotional, intellectual and spiritual support, faith for them meant action. Faith is building arks and leading exiles and praying and fasting and giving and caring. Faith is more than holding on. Faith is looking forward and pushing ahead.

I have sat in a circle of friends, whether it be the “Four Horsemen” group as we studied a book or talked about a round of golf, or around a camp fire, in a small discussion group or in our new member’s class where we have remembered the people who anchored their faith in Christ. Going around the circle, everyone spoke the names of the people who had passed faith on to them.

Their names, like the names in Hebrews 11, just keep coming on and on. The names of mothers and fathers, the names of grandparents and godparents, the names of ministers and youth sponsors, the names of friends and teachers, the names of great leaders—the names of ordinary people who made a big difference.

The power of those names and the lives they represent, are overpowering. These were and are people who have pressed on and who made a difference. These were role models of faith. These were people who had chosen the truth and in love they passed on their faith in that truth.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that the faith of the saints did not die with them. Martyrdom did not quench the faith of the witnesses of old. Neither did the cross defeat Christ. Neither does death stop the faith or the memory or the impact of the saints that we have lost. The witness of faith is passed on from generation to generation. The faith of those sinners who kept on trying is a legacy for all who place their trust in God.

Your friends in the balcony love you and look on, to see how you and I will run the race!