



First United Church of Oak Park

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses
Selections from Hebrews 11, 12
The Rev. John Edgerton
November 3, 2019

The author of the book of Hebrews cares deeply about symmetry, crossing every T, dotting every i. It's like it was constructed by an architect, or a structural engineer, making sure that if weight is placed on one side, an equal weight is hung on the other side. Being so carefully constructed, it reaches great heights, seeking to soar all the way into the chorus-rooms of the heavenly host.

And there, at the height of the hymn of praise dedicated to the glory of the resurrected Christ, the apogee of the entire book is to declare that Christ has redeemed...the death of Abel...the death of Abel? Why should the author of the book of Hebrews care so much about the death of Abel?

It is an old story, set at the very beginning of humankind's walk upon the earth. Abel has the melancholy distinction of being the very first person to die according to the scriptures. There is no specific account of how old Abel was when he died. But he was young and hale enough to work as a shepherd—physically trying work to be sure. And he was young enough that his parents—Adam and Eve—his parents were still living. This means that there has not been a single generation of humanity, not a single generation of humanity that has been spared the pain of grief. Not even Adam and Eve were spared the pain of grief. To live is to know grief. It has been for every generation ever to live.

These are not history texts. They are not even genealogies or family lore-books. These stories from the rich and ancient soil of scripture are meant to talk about the human heart. They are about the things that make human life what it is, instead of something else. There is a deep truth in all the epoch-old stories of our scriptures.

And in the antediluvian grief of Abel's life cut down too soon, we see something so shining with truth that it makes the heart ache. To live is to know grief. It has been for every generation ever to live. Because to live is to be among mortals. And the glory of the mortal is to live and the end of every mortal is to die. We have, each of us, each here gathered, each of us has known what it is to be parted from a loved one by the impenetrable veil of death.

The author of the book of Hebrews cares deeply about symmetry, crossing every T, dotting every i. It's like it was constructed by an architect, or a structural engineer, making sure that if weight is placed on one side, an equal weight is hung on the other side. And the death of Abel, this needed to be counterbalanced. The inescapability of human grief, hanging on the shoulders of every generation—this needed to be counter-weighted. Nothing short of the risen Christ could lift and support such a loadstone. My grief, your grief, it is worthy of no lesser redeeming than the resurrection of Christ.