



First United Church of Oak Park

Trusted Witnesses

Hebrews 11: 32-40, 12: 1-2

The Rev. John Edgerton

November 7, 2021

On All Saints, we offer to God our most tender sort of prayers, prayers for the repose for our beloved dead, those who are beyond any earthly help, any human visitation. And so any comfort and ministrations can only be accomplished by God. Only God may comfort the dead, and in our prayers we bring nothing to the task but our deep need that it be done. We desire so much to know that in death God is with our loved ones, and they are with God. So how do we know? How do we know? This is what the reading from the Book of Hebrews takes up.

How do we know? Well, the Book of Hebrews says, we have witnesses. Witnesses like those who would testify at a legal hearing, offering testimony that God is with them and they are with God. And the Book of Hebrews offers up a slew of witnesses: Noah and Sarah, Moses and Rahab, Samuel and the widow of Nain. They all testify that God is with them and they are with God. Testimony is good. But how do we know that their testimony can be trusted, how do we know that God will comfort our loved ones even in the extremis of death?

In a legal hearing this would be called voir dire, to examine an expert's testimony so as to ascertain whether they are truly an expert. And the Book of Hebrews goes through an exhaustive voir dire, showing that they can be trusted because they suffered. That is the evidence of their expertise, having lived through great tribulations and testifying that God comforted them in terrible trials.

Noah, who watched the world drown; Sarah, who suffered disappointed hopes for decade upon decade; Moses, who watched his people wither under oppression; Samuel, who endured the political upheaval of a nation; and the widow of Nain, who grieved loss after loss and death after death in her family. Even though they walked through the valley of the shadow of death, God was with them and they were with God.

And the testimony these witnesses offer is for anyone who has borne up under the same kinds of troubles, environmental devastation, long delay of hope, societal scorn and oppression, political upheaval, the death of the most beloved of all. That is, their

testimony is for you, for any of you. For to live is to know suffering even in the best of days. For to live is to know suffering even in the best of days. And you, my beloved ones, we have not been living in the best of days. You have lived through days that will be talked about and studied and mourned for a century or more.

Generations yet to be born will look to these days and say, how could they have borne such weight? How could they have passed through such suffering, through the very valley of the shadow of death? They only could have borne up under such strain with God. And so we face these days, the weight of them as a whole world and of our own private losses, which are as weighty as the whole world for we who bear them.

The Book of Hebrews declares that God will comfort our loved ones even in the extremis of death, but how do we know? How do we know that this is true? Because we have witnesses.

Noah and Sarah, Moses and Rahab, Samuel and the widow of Nain, and we can add to these Carole Bergstraesser, Julia Faust, Delores Coppage Fudge, Phil Gehring, Mary Daly Lewis, Nell Lurain, Judy McCalla, Darold McCalla, James McCoy, Sherlynn Reid, Bob Wolford, Louise Wornom ... faithful to the very end. How do we know? Because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses that we may lay aside every weight, and the burdens that cling so closely, that we might run with perseverance the race that is before us, looking to all the saints, and Jesus, the pioneer of our faith, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God, and there intercedes for our beloved dead, and for you. And for you. And for you. Thanks be to God for that indescribable gift.