

Are We In The Cloud?

These days, you never know what might be meant by the Cloud? A cloud in the sky. The Cloud all our documents and pictures might be saved in. A cloud of bugs? A cloud of smoke? Lots of choices..... when it comes to clouds...

You likely already know what kind of clouds I'm going to mention..... because we already looked at some of the folks who might be in our cloud today at the Learning Time today. They are some of the photo album I have saved on my hard drive of my computer. They are not in the cloud, but are accessible as we might need.

Someone in my photo albums of family is my Great Grandfather – William Moore – known to some as 'Billy' Moore. He was one of my Cloud of Witnesses on how to live a good life. He loved his Bible, and lived a life by it. He came from Ireland in 1869 when he was 9 years old. Landed in Montreal with his Mother... His Dad had come earlier, and had a homestead in the Bobcaygeon area. Nogies Creek to be exact. He was in the logging business, and became a Gov't Scaler for the Province. He travelled all over the North of the Province making sure the logging companies were honest, and above board. He married Grandma - Etta Brumwell when he was 36 and she was 18. And we have many stories of him and his life of Faith. Even one on how he came to marry. Grandma.... But that might be for another day.

He travelled the North for many years, and retired when he was 80 years old. I have letters he wrote to my mother about his life as a Gov't worker in the Logging industry. He told her he would travel to the Logging camps by wagon, train, horse, sleigh and walking. When he got there of course there was not too many places for him to sleep, so he would sleep in the camp kitchen on the bench of the table. He said he always got the first coffee or tea, and the food was always good. But a rough life all the same. His diary's told of the camps, and the logging records he made.

Because he was away so much, Grandma had to look after the farm and raising their three children. She also took on 3 of her 8 grandchildren to raise, my Mom being one of them. When we became old enough we would help them with the farm, and visit every Sunday for dinner. Grandpa would tell us the stories of the bible, and explain to us, what they meant. When you were at their house in time for church, you went. He loved to read the bible to us, and anyone who would be around. (We would sooner be outside playing, but...) So Grandpa was certainly in my cloud of witnesses.... And Grandma too. She made the best cookies.

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Do you have a photo album? Do you ever look through the pages, remembering the people and events that shaped your life? There are pictures snapped long before you came on the scene: aunts, uncles, and your parents before they were all grown up. Then there is that picture of you on your mother's lap or that vacation photo with your father in the background. There is graduation, the wedding, the first baby pictures. Then the cycle starts all over again. We gather up the memories and recall the people who stood by us in the good times and the bad.

That is what the writer of Hebrews is doing in chapter 11. He helps us look at our family snapshots in the gallery of faith: Remember those who crossed over the Red Sea. Remember

Rahab, who welcomed the scouts. Remember those who marched around Jericho. Remember Sampson and Daniel, who shut the mouths of lions. Remember those who won strength out of weakness like Gideon and Esther. Remember those who were tortured, mocked, scourged, and tormented. Those who might appear weak, but in their actions became strong in the faith. Gideon, (32M – 300) Barak (Deborah), Samson, (lion, 1M Phil-jawbone of donkey), Jephthah (illegitimate child- delivered his.. from Ammonites) David (Goliath, noble to Saul etc) Samuel (last judge, and first prophet – great leader) All because of strong faith. And many more. Others.

Why should we look at this photo album of faith and faithfulness? Because in looking, we learn who we are. We learn that we are not alone and that we are part of a family with particular traits and characteristics.

As we look at this remarkable family the writer of Hebrews shows us, we discover two types of faith. One type is full of images of success: conquering enemies, obtaining promises, shutting the mouths of lions, even gaining victory over death. But the other type is filled with images of suffering: public mocking, imprisonment, beating, stoning, homelessness, violence, and death. From the outside, the pictures and images are quite different, seemingly impossible to compare. After all, our culture says we are either successes or failures. But the writer of Hebrews mixes the categories because our lot in life is not a measure of our faithfulness, or faithlessness.

The joining of the categories are a word of encouragement for struggling Christians. If we are struggling, and someone tells us that the true way of faithfulness is suffering, we might despair. Must our suffering continue forever? If we are struggling and someone tells us that the true way of faithfulness is only by success and victory, what hope is there for us? But the mixing of suffering and success gives us a word of hope: faithfulness shines both in suffering and in triumph, both in sorrow and in joy.

So we learn that faith endures. Faith trusts God's promises even when the present and world around us might call those promises into question. In the face of suffering, faith holds on and holds out because of the certainty of a future in which God has something better in store. Such are the lessons from our family photo album. We remember our company. We are not alone.

We remember our company, but we also remember our Journey. We have a race to run. We are not mere tourists in this world, wandering from place to place, taking pictures, visiting landmarks, writing postcards, and then cheerily returning to the safety of home. We are runners in a race—not a fifty-yard dash, but a marathon. The marathon of life.

As runners, we must lay aside every hindrance, even our favourite habits and wants, for the purpose of the contest. And so the writer calls us to lay aside every sin that could trip us up or weigh us down. We summon our dedication and focus to pay the price as we run . But what do we do if all that does not appear to be enough? What if, despite a cloud of witnesses, despite that cheering section, despite our perseverance and sacrifice, we do not know whether we can hold out to the end?

The writer of Hebrews has one final word of advice. There is one more photograph for us to see, the final and most important one of all: “Let us run the race that is set before us, looking to

Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Jesus has been the scout, blazing a trail through all of human existence and tested in every way like all of us, yet finding joy at the end of the suffering of the cross. But there is more. In the context of a race, the *archegos* – *pioneer* is the team captain. In the Greek games, the team captain would run the race and then wait at the finish line to encourage his teammates as they followed in his steps.

Yet Jesus is not simply the pioneer; he is also the perfecter. Here the authour of Hebrews has in mind the first high priest after the exile. Priests perfect and complete what we lack, bringing us to our goal so that we may have full access to the presence of God. So, Jesus not only calls us across the finish line but also fills in and fills out what is lacking in our faithfulness. He takes our incomplete faith and makes it whole.

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Today we also have another reading that calls for faith, when we look at it carefully. Luke 12:49-56 – It seems to talk about division instead of peace and faith. But does it? Maybe it suggests that Jesus is setting the stage for the eventual outcome of his ministry and what that means for those who follow him.

Jesus lets those gathered know that following him will not be easy, particularly because the gospel will not always bring peace. Families were being torn apart when the gospel spread because it changed everything. The problem may not lie in the division itself, but in how we respond to the divisions that happen in our lives. Maybe God is at work in all realities, and that division is not the problem. Perhaps it is in our own naive expectation that we have more truth than others. Instead, could God be at work on both sides of an issue?

Jesus calls the crowd hypocrites, and says they do not know how to interpret the present time. He said they were intelligent about daily things, but not about spiritual matters. They did not realize the important time which had arrived in human history. The son of God had come to this earth, and was standing in their very midst. Heaven has never come so near before. But they did not know the time of their visitation. They had the intellectual capacity to know but they did not have the will to know, and perhaps they were self-deluded. How about us? Do we know when Jesus is in our midst? Is this our important TIME? Do we have the will to know?

So when our knees are weak and our hands drooping, when we feel worn out in the journey of faith, wondering whether we can hold on and hold out, we hear again this clarion call from Hebrews. We remember our company. We remember our contest, but above all, we remember our captain who has run this race and who beckons us home.

HYMN - Helen H. Lemmel, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.”

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|-------------------------------------------------|--------|----------------------------------------------------|
| “O soul, are you weary and troubled?            | .....> | No light in the darkness you see?                  |
| There’s light for a look at the Savior,         | .....> | And life more abundant and free!                   |
| Turn your eyes upon Jesus,                      | .....> | Look full in his wonderful face,                   |
| And the things of earth will grow strangely dim | .....> | In the light of His glory and grace.” <sup>2</sup> |

**AMEN**