

Great Clouds and Level Paths  
Hebrews 12.1-14  
August 19, 2018  
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“Oh Lord, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.” This town has many theme songs, but this has to be our most famous one. If you grew up in Alabama, as I did, it only takes those first few notes from Lynyrd Skynyrd to feel the goose bumps and the pride (yes, pride!) and a sense of home. For us, we sing of the saints marching into heaven even if we’re halfway singing about the promise of another Super Bowl victory. We grab our white handkerchiefs and sing our love ones to heaven with these words. For almost 25 years, Michael White and the Original Liberty Jazz Band have danced us into the climax of Mardi Gras with this song of celebration. It’s a song that roots us here to this place while singing of the hope of a home to come.

We want to be in that number, right? And this is where the problem begins for me with today’s text. I have a hard time with either/or language when it comes to faith. Either you’re a saint, or you’re a sinner. Either you’re in, or you’re out. Either you’re faithful, or you’re faithless. Either you’re bound for heaven, or you’re bound for hell. I’m so tired of those old dichotomies and don’t find them helpful anymore. We know better. We are actively cultivating something truer, more complex, and more nuanced here. We know that we’re all on a continuum between all these things and that life is much more both/and than either/or.

We are sinners and saints all at once. If this isn’t true, then there’s no hope for me at all. This is why the church that Nadia Bolz-Weber cofounded is called The House For Saints and Sinners. We’re both. All the time. Often in the same hour. I think it’s important to hold that in one hand as we turn to Hebrews 11 and 12 with the other. The talk of perfection and fighting a clinging sin can launch us toward thinking of division and camps, teams and winners, and far too much self-criticism. So I’d like to propose we name that old tendency toward dualism and then work together toward a better understanding of what the Hebrews Preacher was offering his listening audience.

We read this long passage last week of ALL the ways our ancestors acted in faith, lived their faith, stepped out and forward by faith. A litany of people “of whom the world was not worthy.” And this, this list, this legacy, this cast of characters—flawed and textured and nuanced as we are; saints and sinners all at once—**this** is the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. **This** is the group that goes ahead of us and is drawing us onto the way of God. It’s a great invitation.

But you see, there's another cloud. The Hebrews preacher doesn't call it that, so I'm taking a bit of literary license with the text for our understanding. The writer connects the cloud of witnesses to this other reality through a shared root word of surrounding and clinging. Those of you who live on the West Bank or North Shore. Think of the days you cross a bridge on your way here, the clouds hanging low, almost as if they are clinging to the bridge itself. Surrounding you, becoming part of your journey, limiting your vision, so thick is the surrounding.

We are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses **and** a "sin that clings so closely." See, there's this other lingering, surrounding, clinging cloud that welcomes us, too. The writer links the first cloud to the second, and in doing so is telling us that the champions of the faith are just as close to us as everything that pulls us off of the level path.

The sin that clings so closely. That word "sin" threatens to launch us back to the either/or dualism. But we said we aren't going to do that—we aren't going to read the text in that way. So let's sit with it a minute, first. The choice is not either we follow the cloud of witnesses toward God's Way OR we give into our animal instincts and wallow in sin. That's too easy, too simple, too elementary. The sin here is *hamartia*—missing the mark. We know this word, many of us. This is the archer's term—aiming toward a goal, but the arrow shoots over, under, to the left, or to the right. Misses. On the path, but the path veers. Aiming, but falling short. On the way, but dropping off. This is not a word of shame and finality—well, I missed my mark, so I'll never try again—no, this is a word of active participation, error, and stepping right up to the mark again.

And the writer tells us this veering, missing way clings to us so closely. Just like it did to that great cloud of witnesses. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the people of Israel, Rahab, the prophets, and on and on—they missed, too. They knew the *hamartia* cloud just like they knew the witnessing cloud, and these are the ones who have shown us how to live in between these clouds.

Maybe it's a funny thing to hear a preacher say, but I don't particularly like talking about sin. It's not because I don't believe in our darkness, our shadow selves, or the ways in which we miss the mark. It's that I know what happens when a preacher shows up at a cocktail party. I know what happens when the person next to me on an airplane realizes they're sitting next to a pastor for the next two hours. I know how people sometimes literally bow a little and introduce me as The Pastor and the real life around me stops like a needle scratching across a record. The real conversation drops off. The formality and performance replaces it because somehow my physical presence as a pastor

brings up all of that dualism we said we weren't going to hold onto as we read this text. I step into this place of representing a perfection that the writer of Hebrews says no one has achieved—CERTAINLY I HAVE NOT!!!—not even the cloud of witnesses. We are being made whole, we are being redeemed, it is an unfolding process that has not finished. And yet, I realize I conjure up that self-criticism when I say words like Sin and Perfection because there is a cultural suspicion that I'm on the other side of those things and have my life all figured out, my ducks all in a row, and my stuff all together. Well, let's put that foolish notion aside just like we did with the either/or reading of this text. We are saints and sinner all at once, my friends, especially me. Hear me saying, I am in this with you and do not stand here as one who has mastered life. Ugh. Far from it.

I know the sin that clings so closely to me. Therefore, it's important for us to name some of the ways sin manifests and is described in scripture. Sin is like an arrow being launched toward a goal but missing its mark, yes. It's also my own tendencies to reach above my humanity and act in the place of God and live beneath my humanity and hide from my fullest self. The sin that clings so closely to me is my own fight or flight reaction to being limited to a boxed identity or defining myself by how I think others perceive me. The sin that clings so closely to me whispers to me of false self and false identity and distracts me from the path I'm on. The sin cloud around invites me to hide from who I really am, hide from my potential, hide from what I know to be right and true. That's why the Hebrews preacher says we are running a race before us that requires perseverance. And our feet need to make contact with level paths.

The author of Hebrews uses language of focus and race and endurance to describe what it takes to navigate life between these surrounding, clinging clouds. Growing into the fullness of self, accepting the image of God that is within each of us, loving and serving the world in faithful ways does not happen immediately and isn't a straightforward trajectory. With intention and perseverance, we move toward that goal. This is also not my competition against you to see if I become more godly than you or the first one to achieve Christ-likeness. This is a zig-zagging, up-and-down, on-again-off-again journey toward the place of the steady, level paths.

Frederick Buechner comments, "'Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,' he says (Hebrews 12:1), where the object is not to get there first but just to get there." You see, we're a team together, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have already run this race, and we are struggling against the *hamartia* that clings to us. Two clouds. Saints and sinners all at once.

“The writer of Hebrews has one final word of advice,” Brian Whitfield adds, “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.’ *Pioneer* translates a particularly rich Greek word, *archegos*. The *archegos* is the author, the beginner, the instigator, the impetus, the trailblazer who goes before us...In the context of a race, the *archegos* 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.”<sup>1</sup> The Hebrews Preacher says Christ himself cheers us on our journey and believes in us as we zig and zag toward that level path like the crooked arrows that we are.

Why does it have to be this hard? Why must we talk about racing and focus and clinging? Why perseverance and cheering on? Because this life is hard, and we give up quickly. We sing together over and over through the years: “Prone to wander, Lord we feel it, prone to leave the God we love.” We get locked in, excited, determined we are on this path together to change the world in Jesus’ name, and then we are swept away in a different direction on the next breeze. This is life. This is what happens. It happens to me all the time. Every week. Sometimes daily. I feel drawn into that cloud of witnesses and sense God’s thumbprint within my soul, and half a day later I’m itchy and restless and longing for something else. And the folks in that great cloud of witnesses were the exact same way. These are our people. Saints and sinners all at once. They know. They’ve done it already and been as distracted and zig-zagging as we know we are. And they surround us even now to invite us to keep moving forward, no matter how crooked and slow our pace may be. Keep moving forward and find that place of peace where your feet rest, where your heart can be still, where we take the next sure step together.

Take comfort, my friends. Take comfort in knowing you are not alone.

Take comfort in the cloud that surrounds you. Take comfort in the One waiting for you and cheering you on.

Take comfort in the zig zag community of saints and sinners who gather in this place as we find the level paths together.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=657](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=657)