
A Cloud of Witnesses!

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 15 – Year C

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. — Hebrews 12:1-2

“Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses!” What a delight it is, for so many of us, to be here this morning, surrounded by the witnesses of the Cathedral of St. Philip! Many of us never left this past summer, and others of us have joyfully returned! Still others of us are completely new this morning. Welcome! Welcome to a cloud of witnesses! Welcome to “the cloud,” the “cloud of witnesses!”

I want to speak this morning about clouds. In my life, summer has often been a time of contemplating clouds, and so it has been this year. I have spent the past month delighting in an amazing variety of clouds. Have any of you observed them this summer? Have you pondered the clouds while outdoors, maybe in your backyard, or at the park—or at the beach, or in the mountains?

I have delighted in most every different type, whose various compound names often confuse me, but whose beauty always inspires and provokes me.

I have seen the stratus clouds, those low-level clouds, down-to-earth. I have seen the lovely alto-type clouds—mid-level clouds often billowing into shapes of fantasy and illusion. I have strained to see the cirrus clouds—high-level clouds, lofty and high and wispy.

Each type has its value, sometimes shading a hot summer day, sometimes forecasting a weather pattern, sometimes pouring tremendous rain upon a needy earth. As you may know, clouds form when water vapor coalesces around a tiny dust particle in the air. Clouds actually need small dust particles to form. Every cloud contains some sort of condensed vapor around a small piece of dust.

Then, they take on fantastic shapes. Sometimes those billowing clouds provide creative inspiration. They look like stuffed animals and dreams. But sometimes, indeed, they look dangerous and foreboding to us. The songwriter, Joni Mitchell, saw both those elements in clouds when she sang:

*Bows and flows of angel hair and ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons everywhere, I've looked at clouds that way.
But now they only block the sun, they rain and snow on everyone.
So many things I would have done but clouds got in my way.*

*I've looked at clouds from both sides now,
From up and down, and still somehow
It's clouds' illusions I recall.
I really don't know clouds at all.*

Joni Mitchell, "Both Sides Now"

Back inside this morning, in church, we come across the image of a cloud again. This time, the word appears in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which the writer claims that we, the community of faith, are surrounded by a cloud—a cloud of witnesses. The use of this word is rather unusual in the New Testament. It is the only time in the entire Bible, Old and New Testament both, that the word "cloud" is used metaphorically to refer to a mass of people. (Other words for "cloud" refer to God being both manifested, and hidden, by a cloud!)

Just before this verse, the entire eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews has been summarizing the various heroes of faith, and what those particular biblical characters have endured in their faith. It is at the conclusion of that summary that the Book of Hebrews calls this community a "cloud of witnesses."

Maybe the witnesses around us, in the Bible before our time—and, in our own time, right beside us—maybe all these various witnesses are just as various as the clouds in the sky.

Some of us are light and airy, like high-level clouds. Some of us are dark and stormy, maybe brooding. Some of us provide nourishment with our water, raining blessing down upon others during needy times. But some of us have the potential to do great damage with our storms. Some of us are down-to-earth, and some of us are high and lofty.

But every one of us starts as a particle of dust. Stardust, maybe. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It is water that turns us into a cloud. It is this baptismal water, which we will bless later in this service, it is this baptismal water that turns us into a cloud of witnesses.

Yes, each of us is a type of cloud, in our own way, and in our own witness. Some of us are altos, some of us are cirrus, and some of us are cumulo-nimbus!

Nevertheless, whatever our shape or size or altitude, each of us has a witness. We are witnesses to something. We witness faith, for sure. We believe in something that is not always seen, maybe like water in the air is not always seen, but is always there. "Faith," said Hebrews (11:1) "is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen." Exactly! There is always water in the air, but that water does not take shape unless there are clouds giving witness to that water! The shape of our clouds is the way our faith gives shape to hope.

You are I are surrounded by witnesses this morning, people in the Bible, and people around us, who have given shape to faith. The shapes around us are not all the same shape, or even the same substance. But each of the shapes around you and me are ways that fellow saints have met the challenges of daily life. The parents and godparents of those being baptized this morning are surrounding that child as a cloud of witness. They are here to pass on their particular "witness" to the child being baptized. Blessings to all these shapes of clouds!

Ultimately, however, the "cloud of witnesses" surrounding all of us is a witness to someone else. We are, each of us, a witness to Jesus. We are here because we have seen Jesus somewhere, or maybe—if we cannot say we have seen Jesus—because we WANT to see Jesus somewhere. The people around us today are those who want to see Jesus: Jesus, whom the Bible calls the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Sin, says the Epistle to the Hebrews, is whatever gets in our way of that vision of Jesus. When Joni Mitchell sang forlornly about "cloud's illusions," I believe she could have been singing about the illusion of sin. Sin is the illusion, any illusion, that gets in the way of seeing Jesus.

Yes, sometimes clouds can be illusions that get in the way. But sometimes (oh, far more often), they are inspiration for us. They nourish us with living water!

And so the Epistle to the Hebrews urges us: "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2)."

What do you see in the clouds this morning? I see witness. I see the lovely shapes and sizes of faith, some billowing and beautiful, and some wispy and fragile, but still beautiful—all of us giving shape to faith and following Jesus, our pioneer, our perfecter, our Lord.

AMEN.

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