

Tenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Someone to Watch Over Me"

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

August 16-17, '25

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Someone's watching you" can make us uncomfortable. "Why? Who are they? Am I in danger?" "Someone's watching **over** you" is a different thing entirely. The thought of someone watching **over** me makes me feel protected and safe. In today's epistle, from the letter to the Hebrews, we get that sense when we're reminded that "*we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*" (Hebrews 11:12:1a), not just watching but cheering from above. This weekend Ryan Thomas and Erik Arlo are being baptized. They will gain that great heavenly cheering section, rooting them on, lifelong.

There are names of interesting faith influencers in that *cloud of witnesses* in this passage from Hebrews 11. I'm guessing some of the names are familiar to you and others are not. (I had to look up at least one of them, Barak: Judges 4 & 5!) You might think if they made the cut to get on that list they're all spiritual Boy Scouts with perfect records. **But**, if they were running for political office, the people doing oppo research on them would have a field day.

- On **Rahab's** resume her occupation would be prostitution. (Joshua 2:1-21, 6:25)
- Truth be told, **Gideon** was a scaredy cat. The angel of the Lord assigned to give him a message from God finally found him in a wine press, hiding out of fear of the people (Ammonites) he was being commanded to conquer. (Judges 6-7)
- **Samson** was a weird duck, all 'round. To punish his father-in-law for giving his wife away, he catches 300 foxes, ties their tails together, attaches a torch to each set of tails, then releases the foxes into the Philistine cornfields which are burnt to a cinder (Judges 15:4). That's odd by any measure. Then there's the whole episode with Delilah (his relationships with women were problematic....), the haircut, the capture, his blinding, the pulling down of an entire building upon himself and his captors. (Judges 13-16)
- Don't even get me talking about **Jephthah**. Yes, he's a successful Israelite general, but only after he begs the Lord for victory and promises, if he gains it, to sacrifice to the Lord the first living thing that crosses his path. Tragically, that happened to be his daughter, who joyfully danced out to congratulate her father. (Judges 11-12)
- **King David** is called "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), even though he was also an adulterer, murderer, and unwise parent in many ways.

One Bible scholar says this about all of that:

It is a curious list, and some of those named were notorious for hesitation, bad judgment, hot temper, or rashness. But the author singles out their faith for comment.¹

"Oh, darn, they weren't perfect!" "Thank Heaven, they weren't perfect!" 'Must mean there's hope for us, too, imperfect as we are. **We** can have faith, despite our faults and failings. **We** can trust God in the midst of our trials, **we** can encourage others by our example, we can be part of an earthly chorus of witnesses to God's goodness and God's power to save.

So let's think of our loved ones who have gone ahead, already part of that *great a cloud of witnesses* above, who have taught us and shaped our faith by their example, who trusted in the midst of their trials. They didn't literally enter a lion's den like Daniel (Daniel 6:18, 23) or opt to be thrown into a fiery furnace like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3:19-28). They weren't sawn in half like Isaiah, according to legend, but they were faithful and faith-filled in their own circumstance and time. Maybe these aren't even people we've met, but people whose stories we've come to know, like Oskar Schindler of *Schindler's List* fame. He was no angel. But he put his life and his livelihood on the line to save approximately 1,200 Jews who worked in his factory.

I think of my Grandma Flossie Horton, whom I mention fairly frequently ☺. She buried 2 children, helped to raise 5 grandchildren. There was no doubt where she'd be, both morning and afternoon: in the prayer chair in her bedroom, praying for all of us. I think her prayers are still having good effect.... Who are the people in **your** life who have helped to shape your faith, through **their** faith??

We can influence others in **this** life, not just the next. We can be part of an earthly cloud of witnesses, right here and right now. Amen

¹Robert H. Smith. *Hebrews* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 151.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham