

## Hebrews 11:1-4, 6, 13, 32-12:3

### Our Vows: Witness

Sunday November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> in our Consecration Sunday Stewardship Program sermon series on our Membership Vows. Today we are looking at stewardship of our promise to “Witness” for our faith. Witnessing is the 5<sup>th</sup> vow we make, but we are addressing it today, because today is “All Saints Sunday” as well as the Sunday we recognize our veterans.

Today, as we gather, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses: the living and the dead we honored. We are surrounded by angels and archangels; people present in this God’s house and those spread all over the world watching and worshipping with us too. The image the writer of Hebrews was trying to evoke was that of an Olympic Stadium where we are running the race of faith being cheered on by those who ran the race before and won.



We will share in Holy Communion with them, and today as our scripture says, we will be perfected with them. We need each other and the end of earthly life does not end our relationship and need for one another.

I am going to walk through Hebrews 11 today touching on several of the verses. I can’t touch on them all, and there are at least a dozen inspiring sermons in these verses; so I encourage you to go and read all of Chapter 11 on into Chapter 12.

Now the major theme here is “faith and endurance in the face of the tests and trials of life”, the good, the bad and the ugly. Chapter 11 is most known for verse 1, “**Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.**” Faith is confidence and a steady internal knowledge and assurance of our eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Faith is an understanding that God created the Universe. All that we can and cannot see, touch, taste, hear and smell has been created by God! I was given an article recently that was titled, "Scientists say Universe Shouldn't Exist". It came out of the work by the European Organization for Nuclear Research, they frankly admitted, that because of what they had found, which there is a balance of matter and antimatter in the universe, the universe shouldn't exist.

An asymmetry should exist, because symmetry should annihilate the universe. Hard to explain, but the bottom line for believers is the balance exists because of God. It is an ordered Universe because as the Bible says our God is not a God of chaos.

Verse 6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him

must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." A life of righteousness and faith does have its rewards. In this life we get to be witnesses, and in the life to come we live in the presence of God forever. The rewards of a life of faith in this life are not always that obvious. Verse 13 makes this clear after listing a bunch of Old Testament saints who lived their faith it says:

"All these people were still living by faith when they died.

They did not receive the things promised;

they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance,

admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth."

You don't always get what you want in this life, and this has certainly been the case for many of the saints who lived out their faith trusting in God despite the circumstances of their lives. In this life we don't receive the perfection and fullness of God's promise, and we only receive it together in the life to come.

Most of verses 5-31 of this chapter were not read, and again I encourage you to read these with the idea that these saints are made saints by God through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. A saint is "a holy one of God" and we know when we look at our lives, and even the lives of those we honor today, that we and they are made saints only through the grace and mercy of God.

Now witnessing occurs as 2 radically different kinds of life experience in Hebrews 11:32-40. First there are the witnesses, the saints, who achieved great success in life here on earth. These are outlined in verses 32-35a. Through their faith they conquered kingdoms, shut the mouths of lions, became powerful in battle and **"Women received back their dead, raised to life again."** Vs. 35a

This is how we want our faith experience to be: victorious, triumphant reaping the rewards and the riches of this earth. We hear this preached as the "Prosperity Gospel" and look askance at those who experience this, and wonder if those who achieve such prosperity and success have actually sold out to this world. But for some this is what God chooses to be their witness. The question is, "are they faithfully and trusting in God alone in the midst of the temptations of prosperity and success?"

The other type of witness that is spoken of here is in verses 35b-38 and these are those who have suffered as their witness. It speaks of witnesses (and the Greek word "witness" came to mean "Martyr" because so Christians died for their witness.) These are those who held onto their faith through great suffering for God. As these verses remind us, they were **"tortured for their faith, imprisoned, killed, beaten, sawed in two."** They were "Jeered" at, which here in America is the most common type of suffering we actually receive for practicing our faith.

Today, many in America hold onto their faith in the face of corrosive attacks by those who say it's politically incorrect to believe and practice your faith in public. From the ACLU to atheistic organizations like Freedom from Faith there are those who are trying to erase Christianity from the public sphere.

And yet we suffer so very little. I made the mistake of Googling “Christian Martyrs of Isis”. Seared in my mind are some of the most barbaric tortures and murders of Christians. Christians have nearly been wiped out in Syria and in Iraq as well as the rest of the Mideast. I am sometimes haunted by the thought of, “and what have we done to help?”

Indeed, we are all in this together, from the ones who receive great earthly blessing, that being the witness of their faith; to those who have received great suffering, to us gathered in this room and the saints we recognize who have passed on. Verses 39 and 40 speak to this great mystery and promise, “**These were all commended for their faith,**

**yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something**

**better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”** They would be made perfect with us; and we achieve our perfection in Christ only with them. **We are only made perfect with all the saints of God.** Like the Ephesians passage last week in the plural and the Lord’s Prayer in the plural and the Parable of the Sheep and Goats in which the nations are judged. We are in this together!!

So then, since we are surrounded by all these witnesses who are watching us and cheering us on to hold onto to our faith with endurance; let us throw off all that hinders us (from witnessing with our lives), be it fear, or political correctness, or doubts, or the sin that so easily clings. In other words if you are doing something that lessens your witness ask God for the power of the Holy Spirit to stop it.

In the ancient Olympics, which is the image the writer here had placed in the minds of those reading and hearing these words, the participants competed in the nude.



This was because it was in the days before spandex, and it's hard to run in a toga, or robe, or even a loin cloth. They would throw off all their clothes; so nothing would hinder them as they ran. The idea is to throw off all sin that could trip you up.

The idea is to carry on in faith, trust and witness, whether you are incredibly blessed, or incredibly oppressed for God. Rid your life of everything that stands in the way of the spread of the Gospel. Don't grow weary and lose heart though your neighbor sleeps in and the world seems to sneer at your faith. God is not done with this world, and God is not done with you and your witness!

As I thought about it this week, I realized once again, that sometimes our best witness is simply an invitation to "come join me." It worked very well for Jesus. He even endorsed it as a lifestyle in Matthew 25:35, "I was a stranger and you invited me in."

You see God made us human beings to be herd animals. We have a deep instinctual need to belong. It's what makes both families (good) and gangs (bad); so successful. If we don't have a family we will make one. If we don't have a community we will search for one. It is why I say **Christianity is as much about belonging as believing.**

In the book I use for my Huddle groups, which are Discipleship Groups, there is the story of the "Karma Army". A man named Danny Wallace inspired by his crazy uncle who at one point tried to start a farm commune community that failed, decided to pick up the idea of forming a community for those looking to belong.

He simply put in the paper a short ad that said, "Join me. Send on passport-sized photo to (His Address). Within a week he had over 100 members. They had signed up for a group for no other reason than to belong.

His joinees then expected him to give meaning to this community, which so far had none. So he gave the group a name and decided that to be a member of the Karma Army you had to do one random act of kindness on Fridays which he called "Good Fridays", and then he asked

them to share what they did. This community of people looking to belong has grown to 1000s around the world. My friends' people are desperately looking to belong.

I believe, we as Christians, have the world's best community to belong to, and we need to simply invite people to join us. There are lots of open doors into the Christian faith here at Vista. There are doors through religious spaces such as Bible Studies, Worship, Choirs. There are doors through spiritual spaces to invite people to like our rummage sales, our picnics in the park, our Vista Fine Arts program.

Some people, who would never set their foot in the door for worship service in this religious space, would come here to hear a musical presentation. Once you get them in the door, through the tremendous events our Fine Arts Program puts on, they will be more open to an invitation to worship here in person on a Sunday morning.

Our youth participated in our witness this week by the 300 bags of candy with a cross and a Vista sticker on them they passed out on Halloween inviting people to Vista. They met people their age in a positive fun situation to invite them to Church. We also witnessed in our Mission trip to Agua Prieta yesterday and more will be coming on that adventure.

And do you have friends and relatives or children spread across the country, or world, who are not in worship on Sunday? Invite them to join us here on Live Stream in the comfort of their own home. Ask them to look for you in the congregation. We start live streaming at 9:45am every Sunday now. You can tell them where you are sitting and that you will wave to them at some point.

John Wesley said, as you can see from the statue on the front of our Bulletin, **"The world is my parish."** In his ministry, and for his day and age, he was well traveled and took the gospel far and wide. But he never had the tools that God has given us here.



John Wesley sent out his message through men he trained to preach the Gospel. In early Methodism in America the average age at death of a circuit rider was 29. It was a hard witness God called them to.

Today we send out the Gospel of Jesus Christ literally to the world as we worship in the comfort and joy of this place! Our internet uploads our service in HD and people literally around the world have been watching!

If you have ever heard Jesus' words to all his disciples in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses

in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." And you have wondered and thought, "could these words apply to me?" Well the answer is yes, now! Now they do, because the Holy Spirit and a new technology has been given to us the power to do this.

All you have to do to participate in this, to have stewardship over your vow of witness, is to show up on Sunday morning with joy and love and positivity and worship God with Gusto!

That's how you take your witness to world! That's how this little church on a desert island now takes the Gospel to the ends of the earth. You take the Gospel, we take it together.

Glory to God Amen!!

And now let us join together with angels and archangels, the living and the dead, those yet to be born, this great cloud of witnesses as we remember Jesus' sacrifice and death on our behalf in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.