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## *A Cloud of Witnesses*

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**The Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
**A Sermon at the Cathedral of St. Philip**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**

**Proper 15C**  
**Hebrews 11:29- 12:2**

Hebrews, chapter 12, beckons us with these majestic words: "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

For several weeks now, I have been pondering this passage, and this particular image of a "cloud of witnesses." Our biblical writer says that the community of faith is like a cloud of witnesses. What is a "cloud" of witnesses?

I know what regular clouds are. I have been in love with clouds ever since my childhood summer afternoons in Coweta County. When you were a child, did you lie on your back, in the cool grass somewhere, and gaze into those beautiful clouds? Maybe you've done that this summer. What delight I had, what mesmerizing delight, to see those clouds drifting so far above me, and then to see them transform themselves into the wonderful shapes of people and animals and the land itself.

Sometimes they began as baby clouds, tiny wisps of breath and breeze. Indeed, clouds are seeded by only a particle of dust and molecule of water. In my childhood, they seemed to grow out of nothing. They took on wondrous shapes that I had no way of predicting. They became great animals, or huge mountain ranges, or even people I knew.

Some would disappear just as quickly as they had formed, collapsing and blowing away. Other clouds would grow and grow, grow into giants, huge grandfather clouds. Those clouds could be gentle and billowy, and they could become dark and angry.

It is curious that the biblical writer calls the saints of ages past a "cloud of witnesses," a phrase used nowhere else in scripture or ancient literature. It is curious, but also accurate.

Look at these biblical heroes that our writer mentions in Hebrews, chapter eleven. They come in all shapes and sizes. There is the warrior, the prophet, the hero, even the prostitute. Some had long and persevering lives. Some of their lives lasted only a breath. But they were all of them saints. They were all of them, part of a great cloud, the great cloud of witnesses.

Each of you, here this morning, is part of the cloud of witnesses. You were baptized once with a small splash of water and a dose of spirit. Now, compared with the world, you are a tiny element of water and air and dust, knit together for a season, in order to be part of a great and beautiful witness.

These babies whom we baptize today are to become clouds of their own. They will become witnesses of their own, and who knows what they will witness to. Even as innocent children, they will show us truth; and, in their maturity, they will show us something of God.

That is the nature of a witness. A witness points to something else, something beyond ourselves. When we baptize people into the Christian faith, they become witnesses for us. They have the ability to show us something about God.

This very community is a cloud of witness, a community of faith. When people drive up and down Peachtree Road, what do they imagine when they see this grand edifice? On the surface, it looks imposing and beautiful, maybe like a looming and mysterious cloud. But no stranger will have an intimate experience of the Cathedral of St. Philip unless he or she knows a member of this community. A passerby in Atlanta does not really know the Cathedral unless he or she knows a member of this community, an actual person in this great cloud of witnesses.

One of my favorite psalms this summer has been Psalm 104. At verse 3, it says of God, "you make the clouds your chariot. You ride on the wings of the wind."

I learned a lot about wind this summer. I discovered that my search for the wind, my chasing after wind, was really the wind searching for me. And this verse, from Psalm 104:3, has stayed with me. "God, you make the clouds your chariot. You ride on the wings of the wind."

The clouds I pondered as a child taught me much about God. They were indications of God's wind, God's spirit, which blew through me and energized me.

But today, I realize that the clouds which provide a chariot for God are not just the visions I have in the heavens. The cloud that is a chariot for God is also us, this cloud of witnesses, this community of faith that surrounds you and me.

Today, right here, we are part of that cloud of witnesses. And the chariot that God rides on is not just one of us, but all of us put together. One particle of dust and water vapor in the air does not make up a cloud. But, together, many particles of water vapor and dust and spirit-Holy Spirit, come together as a cloud.

We are a far more powerful witness when we are together, when we are a cloud of witnesses. We are more powerful in the same way that cloud computing is more powerful than single computing!

One hero or one saint would not have been enough to be a community of faith. Rahab or Gideon or even Moses alone would not have been enough. You or I, on our own, are not enough to create a community of faith, a church, a cloud of witnesses to faith.

But, together, we are a great cloud, a great community. Together, we have faith. And that faith is what we pass on to these children being baptized today. By faith, by faith, by faith our ancient heroes pressed on, and it is by faith that we press on, too. Faith, said the writer to the Hebrews, is "the substance of things unseen, the assurance of things hoped for" (Hebrews 11:1).

Today, as we baptize new Christians, we also begin another season of Christian education and Christian community in this grand Cathedral. It will be a season of re-establishing our sure foundation, faith, perfected in Jesus Christ our Lord. That faith is our sure foundation. Yes, faith is the substance that turns a cloud into a foundation. What looks like only water and air and dust can become a chariot, carrying the power and the glory of God.

AMEN.

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