

## **Finding Our Courage: Not Ghosts, But Guides and Friends**

Focus: 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

The soul . . . the soul is a stubborn thing. . . Souls remain. They remain here in the air, in empty space, in dusty roots, in sidewalks that I knew every single inch of like I knew my own body, as a child, and in the songs that we sing, ya know. That is why we sing. And, maybe that's what I'm lookin' for when I go down there, I just wanna commune with the old spirits, stand in their presence, feel their hands on me—  
“That is Why We Sing,” Bruce Springsteen, *Springsteen on Broadway*

Give thanks for the past, for those who had vision, who planted and watered so dreams could come true—  
Hymn, *What Gift Can We Bring*

### **First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 16:5-11**

Our first Scripture Lesson is from the Old Testament, the Book of Psalms. This is a Psalm that begins by looking back to our inherited past: *the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places: I have a goodly heritage.* And ends by looking forward to our anticipated, *eternal* future: *In your presence, Lord, there is fullness of joy: in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.* And in between, there is a sense of God’s abiding presence, giving us courage in the present.

The Psalms are poetry, and if poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility, then the powerful feelings recollected in this poem—Psalm 16—are those of gratitude and joy. Listen now for God’s Word to us, Psalm 16; the Psalmist begins:

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;  
you hold my lot.  
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
I have a goodly heritage.

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;  
in the night, my heart instructs me.

I keep the LORD always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.  
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;  
my body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol,  
or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.  
In your presence there is fullness of joy;  
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

## **Second Scripture Lesson: Hebrews 11 and 12 (selected verses)**

Our Second Scripture, from the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews, also has a past, present, and future movement.

After offering the now well-known definition of faith, the author recounts some the heroes of faith from the past, who through their lives and courageous actions gave evidence to faith's power.

Turning to the future, the author speaks of their hope, their desire for a better country, a heavenly one that God has prepared for them.

And then, finally, addressing us in the present, the author says that because this great cloud of witnesses surrounds us, as we look to Jesus—the pioneer and perfecter of our faith—with them, we can find strength and courage to stay the course of our lives:

Listen now for God's Word to us, the Letter to the Hebrews, Chapters 11 and 12:

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.*

And from there, the writer goes on to list some of those ancestors, the heroes of Faith, concluding:

*What more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of all those, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.*

*Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.*

And then, looking to the future, the author writes:

*All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.*

*If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.*

And finally, for us in the present:

*Therefore, 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, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

## **Sermon**

The best stories are the ones you feel. The ones that get inside you, and that *you* get inside—those are the stories that stay with you.

It's been close to 25 years now, but the opening minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* still haunt me. Yes, of course, sitting there, in the darkened theater, watching the movie, I knew how it all ended: the invasion of Normandy is successful, the Nazis fall, the Allies triumph—in the end.

*In the end.* But the movie makes you feel it *in the moment*—as if you were there.

Eisenhower's anxiety about the weather, the doubts about whether the elaborate deception plan—with its phantom armies and phony radio transmissions—would really fool the German high command.

And especially, you feel what it was like for those troops, those men, those boys, packed into the carriers crossing the English Channel: the rolling, surging seas, the seasickness, the murmured prayers, their choking fear. I can still feel it—where did they find their courage?

Another example: Senator Margaret Chase Smith's *Declaration of Conscience*.

The year is 1950. Senator Joe McCarthy, is terrifying America—and destroying careers and lives—with trumped-up charges of Communist infiltration at the highest levels of US government, business, and military.

Everybody's afraid of him, politicians especially; he has much popular support. But in 1950, Margaret Chase Smith, lieutenant colonel in the Air Force reserve, the first woman to break the sound barrier, Republican Senator from Maine, the first woman to serve in both houses of the United States Congress—she had had enough. Backed by six other moderate Republican Senators (all men of course), she stood up to speak on the Senate floor:

“Mr. President,” she begins (addressing the president of the Senate), “I speak as a Republican. I speak as a woman. I speak as a United States senator. I speak as an American.”

She then laments the “irresponsible sensationalism,” “the bitterness and selfish opportunism,” that has come to characterize proceedings in Congress, saying it has become “a forum for hate and character assassination.”

She identifies what has come to characterize the politics of the day: “the Four Horsemen of Abuse and Slander”: Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry, and Smear.

“Today,” she says, “our country is being psychologically divided by the confusion and the suspicions that spread like cancerous tentacles of ‘know-nothing, suspect-everything’ attitudes.”

And, after reminding her colleagues of their sworn duty to defend and uphold the United States Constitution, she closes by saying, “We are Republicans and we are Democrats, but we are Americans first. And as an American, I want to see our nation recapture the strength and unity it once had when we fought the enemy instead of ourselves.”

She spoke with an eloquence and courage unmatched by any of her peers, including the former Supreme Allied Commander, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who, after being elected President in 1952, could not—although abhorring McCarthy *privately*—especially when he attacked Eisenhower’s friend, mentor, and former superior officer, George C. Marshall—Eisenhower could not, or would not, speak out against him *publicly*; a failure Eisenhower would regret the rest of his life.

Now of course, *we* know how it all ended. Four and a half years after Chase Smith delivered her speech, the Senate voted to censure McCarthy, and his political career was over. Smith, on the other hand, would go on to serve another 22 years in the United States Senate, and be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

But Margaret Chase Smith didn’t know any of that in that moment, and wouldn’t for years to come. The good historian, in telling this story, makes you feel what it was like for her, in the moment—in *that* moment—delivering *that* speech.

Like those troops in the carriers, she no doubt had a faith—a hope—that somehow, someday, goodness and truth would prevail, but *when* that would happen, and *how* that would happen, and what would happen to *her* in the meantime—these were very much open questions.

And it wasn’t easy: After the speech, McCarthy nicknamed her and her colleagues “Snow White and the Six Dwarves,” she lost one of her committee assignments, and, in the next election, McCarthy financed her primary opponent (she still won).

What she did took courage—where did she find it?

One more example: John Lewis and the March on Washington, August 1963. We remember that March because of Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech, but Lewis spoke too.

One of the leaders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Lewis was just 23 years old. The son of sharecroppers, he grew up dirt poor in southern Alabama: as a boy, he would

preach to the chickens as he fed them. King, fifteen years his senior, calls him “the boy from Troy.” (Troy, Alabama, that is.)

In the days leading up to the March, the Kennedy administration is nervous. Kennedy himself calls the leaders (including Lewis) into the Oval Office, and asks them to call it off. “Too late,” they tell him, “people are already on their way here.” So Kennedy advises them to be patient and wait, slow it down and tone it down, change will come eventually.

That night, when the older leaders of the march read a draft of Lewis’ speech, their advice to him is much the same: be patient and wait, slow it down and tone it down, change will come eventually. Lewis—young, polite, deferential—is willing to make *some* changes. But *then*, no more: “I’ve got to speak for my people,” he says.

Lewis is only 5’6” tall, so when he steps to the podium set up on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that day, he can barely see over all the microphones. In fact, about a minute into the speech, you see this hand come into the picture to push them down one . . . by . . . one . . . by one (it’s on YouTube).

There’s rustling behind Lewis; it’s a hot day, the crowd—a sea of people stretching out across Mall—is murmuring; Lewis’s south Alabama accent is thick.

But then, about midway through the speech, he says:

*To those who have said, “Be patient and wait,” we have long said that we cannot be patient. . . . We are tired. We are tired of being beaten by policemen. We are tired of seeing our people locked up in jail over and over again. How long can we be patient?*

Now, he’s got their attention. And voice and pace picks up:

*We want our freedom and we want it now. We do not **want** to go to jail. But we **will** go to jail if this is the price we must pay for love, brotherhood, and true peace.*

Now the crowd is with him, applauding, responding:

*They’re talking about slow down and stop. We will not stop. . . . But we will march with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today.*

*By the force of our demands, our determination, and our numbers, we shall splinter the segregated South into a thousand pieces and put them together in the image of God and democracy. We must say: “Wake up America! Wake up!” For we cannot stop, and we will not and cannot be patient.*

The next day, when the leaders of the March again meet with the President in the Oval Office, amidst the general congratulations, Kennedy says to Lewis only, “I heard you.”

He was just 23 years old: this boy from Troy, this sharecroppers' son who used to preach to the chickens; and yet on that day, in that moment, they *all* heard him: he spoke to a quarter of a million people, not to mention the conscience of a nation—where did he find the courage?

He had a faith and a hope—faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen—one that defined his life—a faith and hope that somehow, someday, goodness and truth would prevail. But *when* that would happen, and *how* that would happen, and what would happen to *him* in the meantime—these were very much open questions. And if you know anything about Lewis' life, or if you've seen the movie *Selma*, you know it wasn't easy: so again, where did he find his courage?

But the more pressing question may be this: where do *we* find *our* courage?

Because we need it too. As followers of Jesus, we have faith and hope that somehow, someday, goodness and truth will prevail. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. But *when* and *how* will that happen? And what happens to *us* in the meantime?

For us, in our moment, these are open questions, too. And if we are to *do* what is right with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, and do it in the face of uncertainty and at some personal risk, perhaps even great personal risk—that takes courage.

Our day too has its troubles, its challenges, its distractions, and its temptations to despair, so again: where do *we* find *our* courage?

Well, start here: with that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, including those boys in the troop carriers, Margaret Chase Smith, John Lewis, all those who marched on Washington that day and so many others, so many, many others:

*For time would fail me to tell of all those, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, won strength out of weakness, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.*

Their stories—all their stories—inspire us: their courage gives us our courage. And this is true whether they belong to our shared stories as a nation and a people, or our shared stories as a congregation, or our personal stories as families, friends, and individuals.

But even more than inspiring us, their stories remind us that they are here with us today, those people of faith, part of that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us—not as ghosts, but as guides and friends to give us our courage.

I, for one, have no doubt that the spirit of Abraham Lincoln was there with John Lewis on that hot August day in 1963, and with all those crowded around the Reflecting Pool on the National Mall. Just as I have no doubt that the spirits of all those who have loved us and whom we have

loved are here with us today in this church. Their courage gives us our courage, as we look together to the great pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

The best stories are the ones you feel. The ones that get inside you, and that you get inside—that make you feel what it was like in the moment, in *this* moment. So take a moment now, and remember those who have been with you on your journey—and are with you here and now—as part of that great cloud of witnesses, as guides and friends.

*All of these who died in faith in this way make it clear that they are seeking a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.*

And that is why we sing:

“Give thanks for the past, for those who had vision, who planted and watered so dreams could come true”—as Les said, that’s a line from a hymn we’re about to sing, *What Gift Can We Bring*, a hymn that will be our theme throughout this Stewardship Season. Les, your grandfather and your mom and dad, are part of that great cloud of witnesses here with us today, along with so many, many others. They are here with us now, as they will be at the Memorial Organ Recital and Remembrance Reception this afternoon

And I know this because, well . . . because:

The soul . . . the soul is a stubborn thing . . . souls remain. They remain here in the air, in empty space, in this place, in the places we knew as children. And in the songs we sing—and *that is why we sing*: to commune with the old spirits, to stand in their presence, to feel their hands on us, as our guides and our friends, to help us find our courage.

And that is why we sing . . .