

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US



Hebrews 11:1-3

31st Message

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November 2, 2025

We live on a short block of ten houses. The street is poorly lit, and there is a lot of through traffic. In the 26 years we have lived here no kids have lived on the block. There have never been any Halloween decorations, and thus no trick-or-treaters. Maybe the Grinch's cousin stole Halloween from our block. The next block down is very different. There are plenty of kids and decorations and trick-or-treaters. But for us, we leave our porch light off and go elsewhere—just a short distance away to a neighborhood that is ideal for Halloween. The street is a U-shaped loop so there is no through traffic. Every house and yard is decorated. There is an abundance of kids. And the house we go to has a fire-pit out front. There we sit and eat and talk. We hand out candy and complement the kids on their costumes.

Many churches and Christians are rather uneasy about Halloween, both the name and the celebration, so they provide safer alternatives. PBCC again hosted a Fall Festival with Trunk-or-Treat. Thanks to all of you who volunteered your cars for the event.

I grew up without Halloween, not encountering it until I moved here forty years ago. In the UK people gather a few days later: "Remember, remember the fifth of November, Gunpowder Treason, and Plot." On that date in 1605, the so-called Gunpowder Plot almost blew up Parliament during its State Opening. Guy Fawkes was discovered in the cellars with 36 barrels of gunpowder, ready to light the fuse. Had the plotters succeeded they would have then killed the king and made England a Catholic country again. For the past 400 years the British have remembered Guy Fawkes each year by burning him in effigy, known as a *guy*, atop massive bonfires, the bigger the better. Bonfire Night or Guy Fawkes Night is also the night for fireworks.

My sister assures me that Halloween is now well-celebrated in Scotland, though it is mixed in with a heavy dose of Samhain, the pagan Celtic festival on that same night. She has sent me cute photos of her grandchildren in the pumpkin patch.

Most people celebrating Halloween are unaware of the meaning of the name. It is an abbreviation for All-Hallows' Eve. Yesterday, November 1, was All Hallows' Day or All Saints' Day. It is a public holiday in many Catholic countries, including those in Europe. Today, November 2, is All Souls' Day. Together these two days form *Los Días de los Muertos*, the Days of the Dead, widely celebrated in Hispanic communities.

These are days of remembrance, of commemoration, co-remembering. All Saints' Day remembers the faithful who have finished their journey on earth and are now in Christ's presence. They form the Church Triumphant. In Catholic theology All Souls' Day remembers the Church Penitent, Christians who have died and are now in purgatory.

The faithful saints include the martyrs, those who remained faithful in the face of death. The word *martyr* originally meant witness. In the early church so many Christians who bore faithful witness to Christ were killed for their faith that the word *martyr* acquired its

current meaning of one who is killed for their faithful Christian testimony. Because the martyrs are an important component of All the Saints, the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church falls on the first Sunday of November—today. If you would like to learn more about how to pray for the persecuted church around the world, there will be a table outside after the service. There you will find material from an organization called Voice of the Martyrs, so-called because the voice of the martyrs still speaks. Each week our e-news draws attention to the persecuted church in a different country. This week is Egypt. In 2015 twenty Coptic Christians from Egypt together with one Christian from Ghana were martyred by ISIS on the Mediterranean shoreline in Libya after refusing to deny Christ. They remained faithful even unto death.

We on earth are the Church Militant. We are engaged in a struggle, a familiar theme in the NT. But our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Our weapons are not the weapons of the world. Our primary weapon is our faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ even in the face of death. It is a struggle to remain faithful, to keep going on our earthly pilgrimage until we enter the goal of that pilgrimage, which is God's presence. We continue to "fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Tim 6:12), as Paul exhorted Timothy. We "run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Heb 12:1). We remember those who have finished their life of faith, whose faith is now sight. At journey's end we will join them, and our faith will be sight also.

In the Apostles' Creed we affirm our belief in "the communion of saints." In the Nicene Creed we affirm our belief in "one holy, catholic and apostolic church." This communion of saints binds together all those who are in Christ not just in space but throughout time. In the most generous orthodoxy, the Nicene Creed binds in communion all the different branches of the church throughout the world. And we here on our earthly pilgrimage are also in communion with those who have finished their pilgrimage and entered God's presence.

At Halloween, with its imagery of witches and things that go bump in the night, I am reminded of a line from a poem from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that I grew up singing as a hymn: "Hobgoblin nor foul fiend can daunt his spirit... His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim." Each verse ends with the phrase "to be a pilgrim." *Pilgrim's Progress* is the second most popular book of all time in the English language after the Bible. But few read it today. The idea of the Christian life as a pilgrimage to a destination seems to have dropped out of favor.

Our service is shaped around these two ideas: the communion of saints, and our one-way pilgrimage to God, to the New Jerusalem, the city of the living God. Some in this communion of saints have already arrived; this includes the Apostles and the Prophets and the Martyrs. We follow them on the same course.

Our call to worship was the opening stanza of the *Te Deum*, an ancient Latin text: *Te Deum laudamus*, "You, O God, we praise." It describes the great company gathered in praise to the triune God:

the angelic host and the communion of saints:

The glorious company of apostles praise you—the apostolic foundation of the church.

The noble fellowship of prophets praise you—those who proclaimed God's word.

The white-robed army of martyrs praise you—those who bore faithful testimony to Jesus.

Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you:

Father...Son, [and] Holy Spirit.

Our Scripture reading (Rev 7:9-14) described the great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language praising God and the Lamb. They were wearing robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb, for they had come through the great tribulation. They had been faithful even unto death. They had not denied Christ. They had finished their earthly pilgrimage, and entered God's presence.

We sang, "For all the Saints who from their labors rest, who Thee by faith before the world confessed." From all the world the countless host streams in, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All over the world today congregations have been singing this very hymn.

The choir sang a beautiful anthem composed by Ralph Vaughan Williams: "Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us." This starts triumphantly, but takes a somber turn: "But some there be which have no memorial...but their name liveth forever more." Across the world choirs have been singing this anthem today.

Who are these famous men? The text is from the Apocrypha, a collection of books written between the two Testaments. The Catholic church recognizes this as Deuterocanonical, a second canon. The Protestant church recognizes it as useful for reading. The text of the anthem is taken verbatim from the KJV of chapter 44 of the book of Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Ben Sira. It lists these famous men: Enoch and Noah; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Moses and Aaron; and many more. You may recognize that these are the same names that appear in Hebrews 11.

Chapter 11 is the most famous part of the Book of Hebrews. It is often called the Hall of Faith. The word *faith* occurs 24 times, 18 times in the expression "By faith," always at the beginning of a sentence. It describes many OT saints who lived by faith. By faith Abel, by faith Enoch, by faith Noah, and so on.

This chapter might seem distinct on its own, and is often treated as such. But it is tightly integrated into the whole book. The preacher wrote this "word of exhortation" to encourage his readers to faithfully persevere in following Jesus till journey's end, to walk by faith.

The supreme model of faithful pilgrimage is Jesus himself. In chapter 2, for us humans and for our salvation the eternal Son came down and became human, like us in every way, sharing our flesh and blood. He was tested and tempted in every way, like us, but without sin. He was martyred, killed for being faithful. But he has become a faithful high priest.

By contrast, the wilderness generation whom God brought out of Egypt failed to be faithful. They fell into unbelief and disobedience. And so they fell in the wilderness. They failed to complete their journey. They did not enter God's rest. They did not attain God's promise: entrance into the land flowing with milk and honey.

The preacher gives a repeated warning to not be like them. "Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (3:7-8, 15; 4:7; quoting Ps 95:7-8). Rest remains, so "Let us...make every effort to enter that rest" (4:11).

In the long central section (ch. 5-10) the preacher shows that Jesus has finished his journey. He was raised into a new creation body, with the power of an indestructible life. The Son has returned to God's presence, bringing his full humanity with him. He is there now as our great high priest, through whom we can boldly approach the throne of grace. We receive the grace that we need for remaining faithful on our pilgrimage.

The preacher ends chapter 10 with another exhortation (10:32-39): "You need to persevere" (10:36). He quotes a famous verse from the OT: "my righteous one will live by faith" (10:38; Hab 2:4). We can elaborate this famous statement. The one who lives by faith will be deemed by God to be righteous, that is, to be living life in right relationship with God. Also, the one who lives faithfully this way will live not just now, but into the age to come.

The preacher has confidence in his audience. He concludes, "we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved" (10:39). Chapter 11 now is a catalog of OT exemplars who did not shrink back but lived by faith. They were faithful.

Chapter 11 flows straight into another exhortation:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (12:1-2a)

The great cloud of witnesses are all those who have faithfully completed the race. They are the many people named in chapter 11, those in OT days who lived by faith. Jesus also has run the race, and finished the course. He is the pioneer, our forerunner. It is as if all these OT saints are in the stands of the stadium, watching us run the race, and cheering us along. Christ is at the finish line ready to welcome us across the line and into God's rest.

What is faith? We talk of the Christian faith, the Jewish faith, the Muslim faith—the three Abrahamic faiths. The Christian church is united in some common beliefs. In the Nicene Creed we affirm: "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty... in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord." This creed unites the communion of saints.

But the church has not stayed united. Friday was Reformation Day. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Saxony. He took exception to some of the beliefs that had developed within the Catholic church. This act sparked the Reformation, and the birth of the Protestant Church. The verse I quoted earlier, "The righteous shall live by faith," was a hallmark of the Reformation, particularly its use in Romans and Galatians. Faith was of great unifying importance. But the Protestant church did not stay united. It splintered into many churches. Many of these have their own statements of faith. Some are long and detailed, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith. These serve to divide rather than unite. They distinguish how one church is different from another, rather than united in a shared common faith.

The PBCC Board of Elders has a doctrinal statement: *What We Believe*. People will occasionally search our website or contact us, wanting to know what we believe: what is our doctrinal statement, as distinct from another church. They want to know if we are "sound" so that it is safe for them to come and visit us. The Elders sign that statement every year. But it is not the beating heart of

PBCC. It is there. But as leadership we want to spur one another on to pursue and draw near to God in Christ by his Spirit. This is what Hebrews wants.

What does faith mean in Hebrews? In particular, what does it mean in chapter 11, this Hall of Faith? The chapter begins with a brief statement about faith:

¹Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for. (Heb 11:1-2 NIV)

“[F]aith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” These two parallel clauses are a little difficult to unravel. The second half of each clause is clear enough. They concern two “realities”: what we hope for, and what we do not see. I say “realities,” but are they really real? We can’t touch them or see them; they are beyond our physical senses. It is not a matter of needing more powerful telescopes or microscopes. Both the Hubble and the James Webb Space Telescopes have conducted deep sky surveys: pointing at a seemingly-blank piece of space and leaving the shutter open for a long time. They revealed a lot of previously-unknown astronomical objects.

There are things that we do not see that better instrumentation or longer observation will never reveal. Until 250 years ago all societies accepted that there was an unseen realm, a supernatural realm. There were spiritual powers that were benevolent or malevolent or unpredictable. Plato argued that the physical world was just a shadow cast by Ideas beyond human perception.

For the Christian, the realm that we do not see includes God himself. But that is the wrong way around: the unseen God is greater than the unseen realm, for he created all things, seen and unseen. Also in the unseen realm is Jesus Christ our great high priest, who has entered God’s presence, bringing with him his blood and the power of an indestructible life which purifies from all sin, seals a new covenant, and unleashes forgiveness of sins. Much of what Hebrews has been describing is in the unseen realm.

The things that we hope for lie in the future. They are unseen because they do not yet exist for us. They form our hope. True hope is not a wishful thinking beyond all evidence. It is a sure and certain thing, but it is in the future. Our hope is centered on Jesus Christ. Our hope is anchored within the veil, where Jesus has entered on our behalf. We may be beset by trials and temptations but as long as we hold on to the rope we will be preserved, because the anchor at the end of the rope is firmly set. At journey’s end our hope will become reality. In the meantime, faith is the *reality* of the things hoped for and faith is the *proof* of what we do not see. By faith we lay hold of them and actualize them for our life.

Verse 2, in a more literal rendering, reads “For by this [faith] the elders were attested.” The elders are those who have gone before. They are the ones commended in this chapter for living “by faith.” They include the “fathers” to whom the prophets spoke in many times and in various ways in the past (1:1). They are the faithful saints of the OT. Because of their faith they were attested. The verb means to bear witness or testify. Here it is in the passive. The unnamed subject of the verb is God—what we call a divine passive. It is as if God were standing up in court and testifying: “these are my people.” There is a bidirectional testifying. By their lives of faith the ancients were testifying to the reality of God; he in turn was owning them as his people living lives pleasing to him. They were being faithful to God, and God in turn was being faithful to them, owning them as

his own. It is this bidirectional loyalty that gets to the heart of faith and the walk of faith.

Before the preacher describes the ancients who lived by faith, he begins with us, that is, with his own generation, the people to whom he is writing. But we can take it as encompassing us also, 2000 years later.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (11:3)

By faith we understand. We do not seek to understand first so that we might have faith. It begins with faith, then proceeds in a lifelong exercise of growth in understanding.

Everyone knows the first sentence of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The Nicene Creed begins, “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” God spoke and things came to be. He created everything by his word. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3). Light came into being in obedience to his voice.

So we live our lives oriented onto God, with whom everything begins, not oriented onto the visible things in this world. These are secondary, derivative, temporal. They are created. But God is primary, eternal. He is the Creator. This is not blind faith. It is not like the White Queen who said to Alice in Wonderland, “sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Faith helps us to see and understand. By faith we understand. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury ca. 1100, spoke of “faith seeking understanding.” This has become a motto for many. More fully he wrote, “I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand.”

C. S. Lewis wrote, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.” This is inscribed on a memorial stone set in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey, installed in 2013 on the 50th anniversary of his death. I believe in God, whom I cannot see. And by or with that faith in God I see everything else. I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who has finished the race, who has run the course, who has entered into God’s presence, taking in there his blood, which he has offered before God, accomplishing the sealing of a new covenant and the forgiveness of sins. In the light of that I see everything else. I begin with God, and seek to understand within that framework.

Faith in, and faithfulness to, the triune God comes first. The two are closely related. If we really believe that he is, and that he is the fount of all being, then we will seek to be faithful to him. Indeed in verse 6 the preacher will go on to say that in order to approach God we must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. We can seek God. He wants to be found, and he will be found when we earnestly seek him. When he is found by us he wants us to live lives oriented onto him, lives of faith.

I think too many Christians have an inadequate view of what God is up to. For too many Christians faith is an individual matter of believing in Jesus and in his death for my sins. Having said the prayer and obtained forgiveness for my sins and my ticket to heaven, that’s the end of faith. But God is interested in so much more. When we come to Christ and enter into Christ, we embark on a journey towards God’s presence. In Christ we are invited into the relationship that the Father shares with the Son through the Spirit. We become beloved sons and daughters. Within that relationship of

faith, we seek to live out our lives faithfully, loyal to Jesus, bearing faithful testimony. He will keep us going.

The writer to the Hebrews has two main points of encouragement. First, look to Jesus. Christ before us. He has run the race ahead of us and finished the course. He is at the finish line to welcome us home. Second, meet together regularly to encourage one another to keep going. We are the communion of saints. We are in

this journey together, a pilgrimage, a race. God is determined that we cross the finish line if we simply stay faithful to Jesus. May God through his Spirit grant us the grace to persevere. And when we are discouraged in trials and difficulties, we can boldly approach the throne of grace, there to find help in our time of need.

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