

The Cloud Crowd

Sermon, August 28, 2022

Text: Hebrews 11:29-12:3

Today's scripture calls to mind a story about the great pitcher, Sandy Koufax. October 13, 1963 ... it was Game One of a World Series between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers. Koufax was pitching for the Dodgers before a crowd of 69,000 in Yankee Stadium. Koufax was one strike-out short of breaking the record of fourteen strike-outs in a World Series game ... a record set exactly ten years and eleven days earlier, October 2, 1953, in a World Series game between the Dodgers and Yankees. In that game Dodgers pitcher Carl Erskine had struck out fourteen New York Yankees. Well, Carl Erskine was now retired, and he was in the grandstands watching; Koufax later said it a huge inspiration to know Carl Erskine was there, the same man who held the record of 14 strikeouts. And Koufax did break the record, striking out 15 Yankees ... he later reported one reason he accomplished this mark was that he saw Erskine was not only watching, but was exuberantly cheering Koufax on!

I think the writer of Hebrews might appreciate what Sandy Koufax experienced that day in 1963. Listen again to these words from Hebrews 12: *"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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* The writer of Hebrews likens our life of faith to an athletic contest or race, and surrounding us in the high grandstands are many of the faith "record-setters" of years gone by, including Jesus, the grand Champion of them all, and they are all cheering us on. *(I'm told the Greek word translated cloud is "nephos" ... it literally means cloud, but figuratively the ancient Greeks used it as a name for the highest and the best seats in a sports stadium. Hence, it fits this imagery of an athletic event with the old record-setters looking on!)* We are in the arena, and these grandstands aren't filled with cardboard cutouts like the sports arenas during the pandemic panic! The heavenly grandstands are filled with the faithful, including many heroes of the faith, a few of whom the author lists in the previous chapter ... those who have finished their race, fought the good fight, and are now watching us, cheering us on, rooting for us. In Chapter 11, he mentions Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, the prophets and others who *"... through faith conquered kingdoms [and] administered justice ..."* We have an untold number of record-setting "Carl Erskines" watching us, pulling for us, encouraging us, hoping we will do as well, if not better, than they did in their earthly lifetimes! A divine audience rooting for us, cheering us, applauding us, hoping we will do well, wanting us to excel. Now, to be sure, I don't believe he means to convey that those in heaven are watching our every single moment; God alone is omniscient and sees all. But I do believe in the communion of saints, and that maybe God allows the dearly departed to occasionally witness faithful endeavors of the earthbound, that He maybe at times directs attention to certain special events for some. I think the imagery being conveyed is that at any given time there are a few or more of the individual heroic faithful looking on, cheering for us, as well as serving as historic examples of faithful fortitude to inspire us on.

I don't know how many of you have experienced the joy of doing something right in an athletic contest or in a musical or dramatic performance and having spectators cheering you on; if you have, you how that feeling stays with you forever! When we looked at this passage years ago I told you about the final inning of the 2005 championship game of the Cal Ripken League in Apopka. The 11-year-old center-fielder from the Flooring Center team was up to bat *(that'd be my son)*. The Flooring Center was losing, 10-9, there were two outs, bases were loaded ... and Steve was at bat. Well, somehow he hit a double, and drove in the winning runs! Needless to say, his coaches and teammates and the fans went wild, and he will never, ever forget that feeling. And I missed it! I was with the youth fellowship at their mission trip in Reading, PA that day ... Steve's sitter, Betty Tanner, was at the game, though, and via cell phones, I was able to hear some of the cheering and share my son's glory moment. In fact, he told me a few years ago he doesn't even really remember the actual hit, but he certainly does remember the cheers! And I'll never forget the first big play I ever had *(and really, one of the only big plays I ever had)* ... I was in my second game as a starting defensive tackle in high school, a Friday night game under the lights with about 1,000 spectators in the stands, and across the line from me was an all-state offensive tackle from Pottstown High who I think weighed eight hundred pounds ... nearly 51 years later I still remember his name, John Nash ... *(I later learned John Nash was also a two-year heavyweight regional wrestling champion, held the high school shot put record at Pottstown for decades, won a full athletic scholarship to play football for the University of Maryland where he was a three-year starter and played in the Liberty, Gator, and Cotton Bowls ... I've only ever played with my cereal and soup bowls!)* John Nash pretty much immobilized me most of the game, except on one play. For some

reason on this one play I got the jump on him, he totally missed his block on me, I burst through the line almost untouched, got to the quarterback, caused a fumble, and the stands went wild ... again, a feeling I'll never, ever forget. Well, I think that's the imagery here in Hebrews! Every time you do something right, the heavenly audience cheers! The cashier gives you too much money in change, and you know she made a mistake, and you know you could just pocket the "profit," but you give her back the excess ... and the stands go wild! You tell the truth when a little lie would be so much easier, and the heavenly cloud crowd cheers! You control your temper and respond with grace rather than with what the other guy really deserves, and woo hoo! the heavenly crowd hollers, "*Way to go!*" You help someone in need, you love your neighbor, you do the honorable thing, you take a stand for what is good, you do or say something faithful, good and right, you basically live out your faith with consistency and integrity in all things ... and the heavenly cloud crowd roars its approval!

I told you about John Nash, now I want to tell you about John CASH, Johnny Cash, the original Man in Black (*not to be confused with Tommy Lee Jones or Will Smith*), who passed away in 2003. For many years, Johnny Cash was one of Nashville's brightest stars, and many knew him to be a devout Christian. However, he was not always so. For ten years he battled an addiction to amphetamines and alcohol. By his own account, the turning point in Johnny Cash's life was a night he spent in a jail in LaFayette County, Georgia, where he was taken after being in a car accident ... while carrying a bag of prescription amphetamines (*for, um, which he didn't have a prescription*) and subsequently attempted to bribe the local deputy. When Sheriff Ralph Jones freed Johnny the next morning, he said to him, "*I've watched you on television and listened to you on the radio; my wife and I got your albums of hymns. We're probably the two best fans you ever had. It broke my heart when they brought you in here last night. I left the jail and went home to my wife and told her I had just locked up Johnny Cash. I almost wanted to resign and just walk out because it was such a heartbreaking thing for me. Here, take your pills and get out of here. Do with your life whatever you want to. But just remember, you have the free will to either kill yourself or save your life.*" It was that talk straight from the sheriff's heart that snapped Johnny Cash out of it. He began a month-long fight to withdraw from his drug habit. It was agony, but as he later wrote, "*I did it by humbling myself like a child, admitting I couldn't do it alone and that I needed my friends and loved ones and God.*" Johnny Cash credited that straight-talking Lafayette County Sheriff for saving his life. Johnny Cash's sense of shame in front of a fan who really wanted him to do well was the spark that spurred him on to change.

We call the men and women listed in Hebrews 11 heroes, and heroic they were, but that does not mean they were perfect. They weren't. All people are people, and people are flawed. It's always been true. Remember who some of these people named in Hebrews 11 were. Rahab, the ex-prostitute of Jericho. Jacob, who had been a cheat and a liar in his past. Both he and Rabab are there in the Cloud Crowd, the heavenly grandstands, cheering us on, saying, "*I know how guilty you sometimes feel. We know how bad memories can trip you up. Keep going! Don't let your past have a future!*" Moses is there, too, saying: "*I know what it feels like when you think you're inadequate for the job. You're overwhelmed; you don't have the words and you don't have the energy. But keep going!*" Samson is there, and we all know his problems regarding self-control and women. David is there; he was once guilty of the worst treachery of adultery and murder. And we could go on. These early heroes were not perfect, but God did not give up on them. That's the good news. God didn't give up on them and God does not give up on us.

Something else about that cloud crowd: some of them, many of them, suffered grievously. This is the hard teaching of Scripture. Just because we are people of faith doesn't necessarily mean our race will be easier. We read, "*Some faced cruel mocking and flogging, even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned; they were sawed asunder; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated.*" Then the writer adds this brief understatement, "*The world was not worthy of them.*" The great cloud of witnesses surrounding us certainly knew what it was to hurt, they knew what it was to want to give up and quit. Physical suffering, loss of loved ones, loss of health, rejection by friends, betrayal by trusted associates ... they know what we go through. They understand what life can throw at us. They've been there, and more.

One related last thing to note about these heroes, including the greatest Champion of them all, Jesus: *They all stayed in the race.* Sometimes in the race of life we stumble. Maybe we betray our own ideals. Maybe we just do something really stupid in an explosion of temper. Or maybe out of the blue life deals us a crushing blow ... the loss of a loved one, a devastating diagnosis, the loss of a job. And we realize that all we can do is just hang in there. Dropping out of the race is just not an option. But dropping to our knees IS. We drop to our knees and pray, "*Lord, have mercy on me. I don't know if I can make it another day in this race, but I must if for no other reason than people are depending on me. Help me to make it.*" Sometimes that is the best that a person of faith can do. We hang in there. We take the blows of life, and by the power of God, we keep getting up off the canvas to the cheers of the heavenly Cloud Crowd ... we get up with a divine stubbornness that says, "*God has not created me to be a quitter. God has called me to be a finisher, with His help.*"

So let us "*Fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, finished his race, and sat down at God's right hand.*" Let us now stand to affirm our faith together.