

## Life In the Cloud, Part 2

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Genesis 5:1-24; Hebrews 11:1-6; 12:1-2

“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. . . .”  
-- Hebrews 12:1-2a

A few days ago, I heard a man say something wise. He said, “Our lives are made up of the things to which we say yes.” Our lives are made up of the things to which we say yes.

As soon as I heard those words, I knew they were true for me, and I assume that many of you would also agree to their truth. I also knew that I’d heard something more than true. I’d heard something about the deep things of life, that dimension of depth that Paul Tillich says is largely missing from our modern life.

We skate across the surface of life, asking glibly if it’s true -- “Did that really happen? Did it happen just that way?” -- forgetting that there is more to reality than history and science.

And we can get so absorbed in living responsibly – zipping from this task to that duty to the other obligation – that we forget Jesus’s words to consider the lilies of the field, which tell us more about God’s beauty and God’s will than all of Solomon’s splendor or our good behavior.

It is possible, I think, to be so busy with the work of being religious – doing the right thing, day in and day out – that we can miss God altogether. I think that’s why Jesus was so critical of the scribes and Pharisees, whom he called hypocrites. I don’t think they were hypocrites because they were bad people; they were hypocrites because they were so busy being good they didn’t have time for God.

And that’s one of the reasons I love summer around here. It’s the slow-down, relax, take-a-breath season. We’re still religious – we still come to church for public worship, we still serve meals to the homeless, we still discharge our duties to those who need us – but the pace, the feeling, the mood – it’s all just a little more relaxed than during the academic year. The lilies are in bloom to remind us that God is near, speaking to us, as the psalmist says, without words or voice, hoping that we’re listening. And walking – walking with God, as Enoch walked.

The text for this morning’s sermon, as it was for last week’s sermon, is the first verse of the twelfth chapter of Hebrews, “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. . . .”

Enoch, as you heard me and Barb read, is part of that great cloud of witnesses. He’s the second individual named by the author of Hebrews, just after Abel, about whom I spoke last week. Enoch is one of those biblical figures none of us heard much about in Sunday School because there isn’t much to hear. He’s mentioned in Genesis 5 as part of the descendants of Adam and Eve’s third son, Seth; he’s mentioned here in the book of

Hebrews; and he's mentioned, indirectly, in the little book of Jude, which is tucked away near the end of the New Testament.

But Enoch, like Elijah, is one of those figures who demonstrate what I tell my Bible students in the Lay School is the "iceberg" understanding of the Bible: the part you see is the smaller part of what's really there.

We don't know much about Enoch, but we know that he was a much bigger deal to our spiritual ancestors than he is to us. He was one of those figures who had such an unusually close relationship with God that even his death was extraordinary: "[T]hen he was no more, because God took him," as Genesis says.

We don't know what that means, but later tradition interpreted it to mean that God "translated" Enoch, as God translated Elijah, directly from earth to heaven without passing through the portal of death the way the rest of us do.

And once in heaven, Enoch was granted special knowledge about angels and demons and the past and the future, some of which was written down in books that bear his name. Those writings circulated widely among Jews beginning about three centuries before Jesus, and then among Christians, some of whom still preserve those writings as important today.

One of the few fragments of thought traceable to the book of Enoch that we might recognize is the notion of the ranks of angels, preserved in our Pilgrim Hymnal as hymn number 30, "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones." A section of the book of Enoch is called The Watchers.

But most of us don't give much thought to Enoch or the legacy associated with his name, and that's one of the things that the cloud of witnesses teaches us: far more of our religious story is hidden from us than is visible to us. Far more of our religious lives, as individuals and as groups, are hidden from the view of others – and, often, even ourselves – than we commonly realize.

But that doesn't mean that the invisible part isn't important, and that's one of the reasons we'll be exploring that cloud of witnesses this summer. We are the products of our pasts – the things we have already said yes to – and our identities as Christians are very much tied up with the things our sisters and brothers in the faith have already said yes to.

There is a saying in Judaism that summarizes this truth nicely: a person without a past is poorer than a person without a future. The past is ours, shaping us and forming us, and ours to make of what we will, for better or for worse; the future has no guarantees, including the guarantee that we'll have one.

It's common now, when someone dies, for family and friends to assemble a photo collage to display at the calling hours. I always make it a point to look at those photos, and I always enjoy doing so, because I see, even in fragmentary form, so much more of the person's life than I knew much about or even knew existed.

Some of you doubtless remember the photo of Howard Rasmussen in his racing gear. I had no idea that Howard raced cars, that Howard *loved* to race cars. He never mentioned it to me in all our visits and chats. And I know I'm not the only person who was surprised to learn of Howard's fast living.

You've had the same experience, I'm sure. The baby pictures, the first communion pictures, the graduation pictures, the wedding pictures, the anniversary pictures. Pictures of birthday parties and cookouts and fishing trips and camping trips. Pictures at Niagara Falls and at the rim of the Grand Canyon. Fragments of living preserved on film that will mean less and less to every generation. And that's okay, despite our melancholy that our lives pass away. That's the way life works. It's brief, it's fragile, and it's precious, and as Janis Joplin said, none of us gets out of it alive.

The venerable figure of Enoch, so fragmentary to us, reminds us that the greater part of our lives are known neither to our contemporaries nor to posterity nor even to ourselves, but rather only to God. Most of us can't recall what we had for dinner three days ago, let alone the weightier details of our days, and that, too, is how God has put the world and us together. Forgetfulness is a necessary blessing to keep our minds from shorting out. We have to forget in order to remember the things that matter most. Forgetfulness is essential for decision-making, and however annoying it may be to forget where you put your car keys or even where you put your car, remember that forgetting the "slings and arrows" life hurls at us is one of God's mercies.

The public selves we work so hard to cultivate are but the tip of the iceberg of our true selves, which come, in their entirety, from God. God knows far more about us than we know about ourselves or anyone else, and God loves us better than we love ourselves or anyone else, including our nearest and dearest.

"Thou hast searched me and known me, O God," the psalmist says. "Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off . . . and art acquainted with all my ways."

Such knowledge, the psalmist concludes, is too wonderful for me, and indeed, it is too wonderful for any of us and for all of us. We cannot attain that kind of knowledge – knowledge of ourselves, knowledge of another, knowledge of God's world – but the good news is that we don't have to. However incomplete our knowledge and fragmentary our experience, both our knowledge and our lives are known by God, who never forgets, who never misunderstands, and who never overlooks. That's the only kind of knowledge that ultimately matters, and that's the knowledge of which we have been assured.

Our lives, friends, are not our own. They belong to God, in whose care and keeping we may rest secure. The call we hear that makes us fully alive is not the echo of our own thoughts, but it is, rather, the voice of love, calling us beyond our fears and our hates and our lusts and everything else, including death itself, that would threaten and impede us from living fully to God and thus fully alive. The glory of God, the church father Irenaeus said in the second century, is a human being fully alive.

However poorly we understand his life today, Enoch was fully alive to God and so glorified his creator. However you choose to do it, in your day and in your way, I urge you to do the same. Say yes to God, to the only One who can make you who you truly were meant to be. Glorify your creator through your living, every day and in every way, and discover the joy of what it truly means to live. It's never too late, and the only thing holding you back . . . is you.

Let us pray. Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee. Amen.