

**SLD11.02.08 30<sup>th</sup> Ordinary All Saints  
Emory Presbyterian Church  
Hebrews 11:29-36, 39, 12:1-4,12-13  
The Rev. Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“We’re All In This Together”**

Friday night I did something I’d never done before – I tore a page from my Bible. I wasn’t mad or anything – just trying to be practical.

I’d heard it was going to take upwards of four hours to vote and as there aren’t just a whole lot of days between now and next Tuesday evening when I have a four hour stretch of time available to stand in line, I decided to head on down to Pryor St. around 5:30 Friday afternoon.

But just because Christopher’s old enough to go out trick-or-treating with friends on his own and I didn’t have any appointments scheduled didn’t mean that I could afford to waste four hours just standing around getting to know my fellow citizens. Time’s been of short supply here of late, and four hours free of phones, meetings, e-mails and kid means time for sermon preparation.

Only when you’re standing in line for four hours, you can only carry so much. And you’d better have water, a snack, and a wrap. Plus I had to have my laptop – which I love but which is very heavy, especially after four hours of holding it in various contorted positions while standing and moving a few feet every five minutes or so. [And let me tell how hard it is to use a laptop without a lap.]

So before I left the house it occurred to me that instead of adding the whole darn Bible to my already excessive load, I’d just (make sure nobody was looking and) tear out the page with today’s passages on it. A page of scripture weighs a whole lot less than 1013 pages of it.

But tearing a page out of the Bible felt strange. Very strange. Like I'd just disrupted something important. A shift of tone in a crowded room. A lively conversation suddenly going silent. A pause. A gap. A held breath. Something waiting to be restored.

Now, I am not sentimental about Bibles. Frankly, I go through 'em like some people go through furnace filters, changing the dusty, fusty ones out every quarter or so. But there was something so... "disruptive" is the only word I can think of... about separating even just one of those 1013 pages from the others. As though every single page were necessary for the whole story, and the removal of even just one left our faith story... well, at the very least, incomplete.

Now, I'm not talking the inerrancy of scripture – you know me better than that. Over time, through scholarship and insight, letters, punctuation, words, even whole chapters change – and I figure the Holy Spirit is in charge of that process, too.

But the whole story of our faith, the whole scope of God's plan - the history, the revelation, the vision, the witness, the mystery, the possibilities, the challenge... well, you don't just go ripping a page out it for convenience.

Unless you're me and you gotta stand in line for four hours to vote. But as soon as you can, you tape that page back in, because you get it that the story's not complete without it, the whole thing being of a piece and all.

Well, in today's passage from Hebrews, Paul (or whoever wrote the book of Hebrews) is describing something else that's all of a piece, that won't do without every single piece of it, that is, the whole continuum of participants in the story of our faith, the cloud of witnesses with which we are surrounded, from which we hail, and of which we

are a part. Think of it like one big Milky Way stretching from the beginning of time clear to the Kingdom, with you and me and lots of people we know, or have known, and a whole lot more we don't, all a part of the milky mass that swirls and curls its way to the heart of God.

Only, when you look up on a starry night outside the city and see the grand opalescent swath of the Milky Way, you can't tell that you're a part of it. That you and your world make up a teeny, tiny, but essential part of its total mass and being. That this particular pulsing galaxy wouldn't be complete without you.

And the reason we can't tell we're part of the Milky Way, of course, is because we're smack in the middle of it. It's all around us, behind and before us, like the ocean surrounding fish who don't notice the water. The cloud of witnesses that surrounds us is like that. We're part of it, an *essential* part, Paul says; it wouldn't be complete without us. But except on days like today, we don't think about it much, don't remember the great swath of the faithful of which we are a part, don't consider the continuum of the story in which we participate, which is not complete without us.

Even the great ones of faith, the titans of our holy history, weren't able to tell the story to its end. Despite their chosen status, their commendable faith, even the patriarchs and matriarchs of scripture were not able finally to complete God's purposes, "since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect." (Heb. 11:40)

Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Mary, the bent over woman, despite their remarkable choices and sacrifices and revelations, God still had something else in mind that would not be complete without the participation of those who came after them.

Something that involved the early great ones, to be sure, that was built on their lives and witness, yet that couldn't finally be fulfilled without the faith witness that followed. As though God's plan does not depend on any one of the Great Ones but on each one of them, and each one of us. And, of course, on each one that comes after us.

Now, this is a novel concept to me - that the fulfillment of those who came before us is not only linked but somehow dependent on us. Never mind Moses, Rahab and Mary, what about our own parents and grandparents?

I don't know about you but I hail from some pretty heavy duty stock. My grandfather, was Stuart Oglesby, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church for 30 years. His wife, my grandmother, Gongga, was the original strong, wise, resourceful crone who took care of all family and household business so St. Stuart could do his noble, public, ecclesial thing. And those who came after my grandparents, my parents and aunts and uncles, well, so far as I could see, they pretty much ruled the world. And Paul is suggesting that something about *their* lives can only be fulfilled through *my* life?

I'd always imagined it the other way around, that I was trying to live up to THEIR lives. But Paul seems to be saying that the fulfillment of God's plan requires their lives, but mine, too, as well as those who come after me, to be made perfect.

And what *is* God's plan?

Some of us recently read William Young's *The Shack* for book club. I commend it to you. Both *The Shack* and the book club. Regarding the book club, we meet every six weeks or so at Rose's house, and she does all the cooking AND supplies sangria, otherwise bring your own libation – our next meeting is Tues. Dec. 9<sup>th</sup> at 7:00. The book is *Three Cups of Tea*. Y'all come.

Anyway, at one point in *The Shack*, God, in the form of a black woman named Papa, explains her overall plan. “I purpose to work life out of death, to bring freedom out of brokenness and turn darkness into light.”<sup>1</sup> Which I guess pretty well sums it up.

Through Jesus’s “death and resurrection,” says Papa, “I am now fully reconciled to the world. Everything is about Jesus,” she says. “Creation and history are all about Jesus. He is the very center of our purpose and in him we are now fully human, so our purpose and your destiny are forever linked. ...I’ve done my part,” says Papa, “but reconciliation is a two-way street.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul might add, a two-way street that every single person, past, present and future, walks for the fulfillment and perfection of God’s purpose.

We’re all in this together. That’s what I hear Paul saying.

So should we get discouraged or distracted or weary (and who of us does *not* get discouraged, distracted or weary, or maybe even forget that there’s a grander divine meta-plan going on at all, Paul offers us these words of encouragement and comfort in the inimitable style of the fussy Christian Pharisee that he is – “it could be worse.” Most of us haven’t resisted sin to the point of shedding blood like Jesus did. Now, doesn’t *that* make you feel better. Clearly Paul never took a course in pastoral care.

Still, when he tells us to gird up our loins and loinettes and deal with the life we’ve been given, he has a point. For whether we can see it or not, even believe it, there *is* meaning and purpose in our existence. We are part of larger plan, a divine plan that runs the spectrum of human existence, a divine intention to work life out of death, bring freedom out of brokenness, and turn darkness into light, through the birth, life and

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<sup>1</sup> William P. Young, *The Shack*, windblown media, Los Angeles, Calif. 2007, p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192.

death of the continuum of humanity. And each of us, in all our beauty and brokenness and nutty, precious specificity is a part, an essential part, of that plan. As were those who came before us. As are those who will come after us. As are those who will come after them. We're all in this together. When one of us falls away, sooner than later God tapes us back into the book right quick, because the story would simply not be complete without any one of us.

I guess there's no place I feel that more than when we bury somebody from our communion. When together we let go of the fleshy presence of someone we love. At George's memorial service yesterday there were lots of visitors and family I'd never met, and I know their presence was so important to Sarah and Ann and Tony and the rest of their family. But for me, when I looked back there and saw Dan and Bill and Stewart ushering, and Jane and Bob over on their pew, and John at the organ, and Nancy and Dave right here up front, and all the other many faces of *our* beloved communion of faith, I could feel it, couldn't you? How we're all in this together? How we're all of a piece? And not just the ones present, but the ones that were, and the ones that are, and the ones that will be after us – the whole cloud of witnesses that surrounds Emory Presbyterian Church?

It was hard burying George, like it was hard letting go of Ann. So many things in life are hard, especially in the face of death. But what I hear Paul saying is that we have each other. And not just those of us in this sanctuary, or in this church, or in this denomination or even this faith, but the great, grand cloud of witnesses of faith, of all faiths, that surrounds us, having been through what we've been through and more, or

who will go through what we go through, and more. We're all in this together. And we're each of us essential to God's plan.

On All Saint's Sunday we take a moment to acknowledge and join with that cloud of witnesses to which Paul refers, to feel the presence and love, the support and blessing of all who came before us. For those who have already heard the trumpet and been transformed, they already know, understand and adore God's purpose, including our part in it. So I figure they're rooting for us. Praying that we'll come to know and trust God's loving plan for the redemption of all creation and get with the program. Because no doubt they know what Paul knew, that apart from you and me and those who come after us, God's plan's not going to be made perfect.

So they're rooting for us and today, we thank them. Today we remember those we love as well as all who keep company with them in the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. Today we call their names in our hearts, and light a candle for them, and ask their blessing, in the knowledge that we're all of a piece, Moses, Mary, you, me, George, Ann, Donna, Gillie, Al, my forebears, your forebears, and everyone who comes after, all a part, an essential part, of God's purpose and plan for creation, a plan which will not, without any one of us, be made perfect.

To the glory of God. Amen.