

“CLOUD COVERED!”  
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Elkton United Methodist Church  
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220<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sunday

Hebrews 12:1-2

Matthew 7:24-25

When I was a student at Wesley Seminary, I had the opportunity to take classes at several other seminaries around Washington. They were all part of what was called the Washington Theological Consortium, so I was able to take classes at the seminary at Catholic University as well as one at the Episcopal Seminary, which was located in northern Virginia – Virginia Theological Seminary. The class I took, and why I remember it so vividly, was a class on the Book of Hebrews, and it was taught by the man who wrote the preface for it in the Oxford Annotated Bible, and was one of the editors of that very famous study Bible used at seminaries around the world. It was such an honor to take a class from such a renowned Biblical scholar.

And it was a wonderful, wonderful class. It’s probably the reason that the Book of Hebrews is one of my favorite books of the Bible. And I especially love the eleventh and twelfth chapters – part of which we read this morning. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is a litany of the “saints” of faith – going all the way back to the beginning. It starts like this: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And then, the author goes to list many, many of our forebearers in the faith, and what they did “by faith.” He starts with Abel, goes on to Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Joseph and how they journeyed with faith in God wherever God led them.

And then, chapter 12 starts with the words we heard today: “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 ... “

I love that picture that the author of Hebrews paints – we’re surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We remember that especially on a day like today, the day on which we celebrate our church’s 220<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses – people who have helped bring us to this place and make us who we are today.

So I’d like to take a few moments on this anniversary Sunday to talk about some of those people, and I want to start by going way back, and I mean, way back

to the start of Methodism itself. You know, we throw around John Wesley's name a lot, and we know he founded Methodism, but I'm not sure all of us know the story of how Methodism started, so that's where I want to start this morning.

John Wesley was born in 1703 to Susannah and Samuel Wesley. His father was a priest in the Anglican Church (the Church of England), and both John and one of his brothers, Charles, would become Anglican priests as well. John was ordained when he was 25 years old, in 1728, but the next year, went back to school at Oxford University, where his brother was also studying.

Not completely happy with the state of the Anglican Church (the Wesleys thought the church was too staid, too set in their ways, and too self-involved), John and Charles started a group – later called a “class meeting” or “society meeting” – in which students would get together for regular Holy Communion, deep study of the scriptures, and outreach ministries (especially with prisoners and coal miners). So methodical were they in their intentional worship, study and service, that others watching them, trying to make fun of them, derisively called them “Methodists,” and the name stuck.

In 1735, both Wesleys came to the American colonies to do ministry, but neither was very successful and they went home feeling like they needed to grow spiritually. Three years later, on May 24, 1738 in a Bible study on the Book of Romans, John Wesley had a conversion experience, where he felt his heart “strangely warmed” and he truly believed that Christ loved him and had died for him, and he gave himself fully and completely to Christ.

Now changed inwardly, Wesley was more committed than ever to the Methodist revival he had stirred up, so he sent some preachers over here to the colonies, actually right in this area. We're living in an area known as “the cradle of American Methodism” that stretches from New York City down to Baltimore. Among the preachers Wesley sent were men like George Whitfield and Francis Asbury. Asbury arrived in 1771, and preached in Elkton several times.

In December of 1784, the Methodist Church in America was formed. It happened at the Christmas Conference which was held in Baltimore. From that point on, the church caught fire and spread like crazy up and down the Eastern seaboard, and then as the country grew, so did Methodism.

But, back to the 1700's. Methodism was formed in December of 1784, and just 15 years later, in 1799, right up the road from here, on Red Hill, a Methodist society meeting started in the home of a man named Richard Updegrave, and thus began our church.

Two years later, the church moved down here into the town, right down the road on East High Street, to the building which is now Providence United Methodist Church. It met there until this building was built in 1859 into 1860.

There, of course, have been many changes since then. In 1902 there were some renovations, including adding stained glass windows and these pews. Imagine that! You're sitting on pews that are 117 years old! (Thank goodness for the padding!)

In 1949, the wing behind us here was added for offices, Sunday School rooms, and a fellowship hall. Then, in 1974 Weldin Hall was added, and finally, in 200\_ came the Wesley Wing.

And here we are today, 220 years later, still built on the rock of Jesus Christ, still, as the scripture says, "a light shining in the darkness." And we're here because of those who came before us – that great cloud of witnesses who watch over us and encourage us even now.

People like those whose names we see in the stained glass around us – the Deiberts, Torberts, Merreys, Terrells, Vinsingers, Ellises and more. The first pastors, who were Thomas Jackson and William Chandler. People who loom large in the minds of some here who have spent their entire lives in this church – names like the Merreys, Deiberts, Brysons, Weldins, Buckworths, Camerons, Georges.

They were some of the saints of this church, leaders in so many ways. They were leaders and planners and givers. They sat in these pews to worship, and rolled up their sleeves to serve. They inspired those who came behind them to pick up the mantle and do the same.

And so along came others – some I remember from my many years in this place – musicians like Miriam Jeffers, Betty Slonecker Evans and my father; teachers like Sandra Holland, Doris Bryan, and of course, my favorite Virginia Biles, along with Gifford; others like the McCools, Cebulas and Campbells; leaders like the Gleaners, and the United Methodist Men and United Methodist Women (who back in the day were known as the WSCS, Women's Society for Christian Service).

What a cloud of witnesses! I could go on and on, but suffice it to say that we wouldn't be who we are, or where we are, without them. And now, their spirit surrounds us, and encourages us, to continue on in faith to be all that God calls us to be. Looking at their stories, and all that they did, inspires us to rise up and do all that we can do for the sake of the Gospel.

Let me show you what I mean with the use of a few “props.” The first one is my third grade Bible, given to me right here in this space on August 31, 1964. Its inscription reads “Presented to Karen Bunnell” by the Elkton Methodist Church School, August 31, 1964” and it was written by Virginia Biles in her beautiful penmanship. I hold this up to remind us that this is what we’re all about – before anything else. We are a people of the Word, followers of the Word, Jesus the Christ. He has been worshipped in this place for 220 years, and God willing, will be for years and years to come.

The second “prop” is something that is a deep and wonderful memory for me. It’s a box, which resembles something I made in Sunday School, as a child here. It’s meant to be the house where the paralyzed man’s friends brought him to be healed by Jesus, but because there was too large a crowd to get to Jesus, they climbed up these stairs and lowered their friend through the roof, where Jesus healed him. This was more than just a box, it was a powerful lesson that has stayed with me throughout my life – the power of caring, of friendship, of commitment, of healing. And a reminder of the wonderful ways we all grow through Christian education and small groups. So many of you can attest to the power of Sunday School and learning in your faith journeys.

The third “prop” is a T-shirt from the recent 5K Run/Walk to Battle ALS. It reminds us that those who came before us taught us about service, about putting our faith into action, and like the Wesleys, reaching out to those who are hurting and on the outside looking in. Saints like Bill Hemphill set this church on fire for missions and it still is a large part of who we are. I’ve told many people before that when I came here in 2000 the missions budget was \$20,000 and now, nearly 20 years later, it’s \$60,000!

Finally, the fourth “prop” is a little red stocking. These stockings have been around for a long, long time. They are used during Advent for the children in Sunday School to give money to the Board of Child Care, which cares for vulnerable children. (When I was a child, we filled them with pennies. Now, it’s quarters.) But what it taught us was the gift of giving. It taught us to learn in reality what was the scriptures teach us – the joy of giving back to God from all that he has given to us.

These props may seem like little things, but they are filled with meaning about the life of this church. We are a people who worship the Lord; we meet together to study the Word, and grow in our faith; we put our faith into action through our service; and we give, because God has given so much to us. And we learned how to do all of those things from those who came before us.

May we do the same for those who come after us. You know, down the road, the young people in this church will be looking back at this time and saying “we

were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses too! People like Bettie Murray, the Tanners, Robinsons, Buckleys, Nolls, McCoys – oh, the list goes on and on!” And we pray they will say that we inspired them, just as we were inspired by those who came before us.

Oh, dear friends, we’re still in the race, and tomorrow, we step into a new year of life for this church. We are, indeed, “cloud covered” – not just by that great cloud of witnesses that came before us, but by the Holy Spirit, who will guide us every step of the way.

So, the next time you hear it’s going to be a cloudy day – smile! For God is at work in those clouds – inspiring us, encouraging us, and leading us – as we continually strive to be a place where people come to “know Jesus, be known by Jesus, and make Him known to others!” Thanks be to God.

Amen.