

*The Grandstand*  
*Based on Hebrews 12:1-2*  
*Aspen Community UMC*  
*August 19, 2007*

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It was baseball season in a small Texas town.  
If you know anything about Little League baseball you know it is also a time  
when little boys, and now little girls, are on the line.  
A certain ten-year-old had ridden the bench most of the season.  
But in the championship game, his coach called him up to bat.  
The little boy's whole extended family had turned out for this very special game.  
His parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, second cousins—they were all there.  
They were cheering and clapping and calling out words of encouragement.  
The little boy swallowed his anxiety and stepped up to the plate.  
He gripped the bat and stared at the pitcher.  
Whoosh! The pitch flew by him. Strike one!  
From the stands, his family cheered him on.  
“You can do it! You can do it!”  
He lifted his bat again and waited for the pitch.  
He swung and missed. Strike two!  
His shoulders started to slump and his hands began to sweat,  
as he stared down the pitcher one last time.  
Whoosh! Strike three! The other team jumped and shouted for joy,  
while the little boy's teammates gave him the silent treatment as they left the field.

Our little batter slumped over on the dugout bench,  
put his head in his hands, and began to cry.  
But his crying was interrupted by the sound of his father's voice:  
“Son,” he said, “the game's not over.”  
Lifting his head, the boy saw his family—all of them—even his grandmother who was frail,  
Spread out across the field, waiting to play.  
They began cheering as the boy picked up his bat.  
His father pitched the ball, and the boy swung. Crack! The ball flew into the outfield,  
And the boy took off for first base.

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As he rounded the bases, cousins, uncles and aunts shouted words of encouragement.  
Somehow, all those able adults were unable to corral the ball he had hit.  
And as the boy headed for home base, his father stood behind the plate with open arms.  
They celebrated his home run by lifting him on their shoulders  
And carrying him around the field.

Today's text is in that story.

Today's text is a little like last week when we talked about how Abraham and Sarah  
Set out for parts unknown because they heard the call –  
And how setting out in faith is always a little if not a whole lot scary.  
But not just that. A call is also an invitation –  
A signal of when the divine wants to take us somewhere new -  
give us something

This takes us to what Hetta read in chapter 12 of Hebrews:  
“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything  
that hinders and sin that so easily entangles,  
And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”  
The text is short, but it is powerful.

This is not a text for a cynic, for someone cold of heart or spirit.  
This is a text for believers – and precious to us as believers.  
It reminds us that we are not alone.

Anybody listen to NPR?

There was a special segment on National Public Radio sometime ago.  
It was a collection of sound effects gathered by Abinadi Meza.<sup>1</sup>  
Abinadi Meza is an artist who is known to use sound (among other things)  
to explore relationships between the individuals and society.

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He had been in a bar in Dublin, Ireland.

A man at the bar contended that Ireland was the home of “the world’s loudest bat.”

You don’t often hear about this, so Meza was fascinated. The world’s loudest bat.

Here was the problem, according to this fellow at the bar.

A bat screeches at a decibel level that the human ear cannot detect.

Your dog and some other animals can hear it. And, special scientific devices can measure it.

But there is a range of sound that humans cannot hear.

And, this bat’s screech fell in that range.

If humans could hear the bat, this man said,

it would be like having a jumbo jet taking off next to your ears.

The man’s testimony was enough to send Meza out with electronic gear to try to find this bat, and try to hear for himself.

Meza was not successful. However, he was able to record

all kinds of other annoying sounds around Dublin

that are usually filtered out by our limited range of hearing.

Sounds that were normally outside the range audible to our ears.

He played a collection of these specially recorded sounds on the program,

“All Things Considered.”

Upon hearing this variety of high pitched whines and screeches,

many listeners of NPR were surely grateful

they were not able to hear everything their dog or cat hears.

Here is the point: just because we cannot hear a sound does not mean that it does not exist.

The fact that we cannot hear it says more about our limitations than it does about the sound.

So it is with things of the spirit.

There are realities that are perceived only by those

Who have become highly in tune to things of the Spirit –

Who are more attentive than most. It is really not all out of our range.

Like the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us,

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encouraging us along the way.

Does anybody remember the name Benjamin Weir?

Benjamin Weir was a missionary in Beirut, Lebanon.

He was kidnapped in 1986 by Islamic fundamentalists and held hostage for sixteen months  
in what we remember the Iran-Contra affair.

During that time he was locked in a barren room  
unable to see another human being.

His hands were tied, and he was blindfolded most of the time.

Even when the blindfold was taken off he could see no farther than his cell.  
An electric light cord dangled from the ceiling. The bulb had been stripped off,  
leaving three fragile filament wires exposed. For Benjamin Weir,  
these wires become a symbol of hope.

They reminded him of the life-giving fingers of God reaching down to Adam

Where do we see fingers reaching down from Adam?

In the Sistine Chapel.

“Here God was reaching toward me,” he wrote later, “reminding me, saying.  
‘You’re alive. You are mine: I’ve made you and called you into being for a divine purpose.’”

And he could see the horizontal slats of the shutters  
outside the French doors - 120 of them.

What could those horizontal pieces of wood stand for?

Any ideas?

He decided they represented that great cloud of witnesses we are reading about today.

People past and present,

Who through times of trial have observed the faithfulness of God,

The presence of the spirit, the existence of something profound

Sometimes outside our limited hearing and sight.

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And finally, his eyes lighted on two white circles near the ceiling,  
one on the right-hand wall, the other on the left.

Actually they were plastic covers for electrical connections,  
But in Benjamin Weir's imagination they were something else.

Can anyone take a guess?

They were the ears of God.

They reminded him of all the blessings of our faith,  
for all those people in all those times,

And, he was encouraged and strengthened. He tells us that by the end of the day,  
He would be singing to himself, "Count your many blessings, name them one by one."

Now the guards outside Benjamin Weir's room could only see a naked wire,  
a French door with slats, and two plastic covers,  
But this Presbyterian missionary could see more.  
He could see the hand of God at work in his life.

He came out of his hostage experience stronger than he went in.

Ben Weir and his wife Carol have gone on to be some of the  
most prominent voices in the efforts for peace and reconciliation in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

So, what is this about for us?

The Little League game, the loudest bat in the world that we cannot hear,  
the story of a missionary taken hostage?

First, they tells us that faith helps us to be all we can be.

And second, that we often can endure what we think we cannot endure because of it.

And third, there is that cloud of witnesses in the grandstand  
reminding us who we are – they we may not hear.

Anyone here read Ann Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*?

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The title is really *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*.

She has a chapter entitled “Why I Make Sam Go to Church.”

Same is her five-year old son. The book is amusing and profound.

She describes her coming to faith in a kind of bohemian lifestyle in

San Francisco, and she has this little boy named Sam.

She happens into this small Presbyterian church and becomes a part of it

And learns about faith as it emerges from her relationships with these people.

She starts out by saying that part of the reason she makes him go to church

Is because she outweighs him by about 75 pounds.

“But that is only part of it.”

And I quote:

“The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world,

Which is to say a path and a little light to see by.

Most of the people I know who have what I want—

which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—

are people with a deep sense of spirituality.

They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are

Buddhists, Jews, Christians—people banding together to

work on themselves and for human rights.

They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle;

They are part of something beautiful.

I saw something once from the Jewish Theological Seminary that said,

‘A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet.

It can be meaningless. Or it can be a part of a great meaning.’

Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom,

Who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are

Home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.

When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew

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Tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. ”<sup>3</sup>

Anne and her son Sam have people in the grandstand cheering them on,  
and so did Ben Weir while he was captive. So do you and me.

Have you ever thought what stories of faith have been shared  
in this sanctuary—over the past 100 years?

You know there had to have been some stories of struggle  
- stories of friendships - stories of surprise -  
and stories of deep love.

I spent a few minutes looking through the membership records for this church.

And thinking about what it was like—what they were like—  
and if they faced any of the struggles we have now

like whether we will be able to sustain ourselves as a worshipping congregation  
in this town, where everybody is coming and going  
and fewer and fewer people call it home.

When I think about what we will look like in the future,  
I surmise that the question has been asked before.

By that cloud of witnesses.

And you know what I think? I think they beckon us  
toward discovering the Spirit today as they did back then.

One more thing:

Think of the cloud of witnesses in your own life—whose in your grandstand—  
who have been in the grandstand for you  
encouraging you to be all you can be?

I am guessing there have been folks we have had no idea were there.

I leave you today with the cloud of witnesses – people we don’t want to forget even if our limited  
ears have trouble hearing them.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://abinadimeza.net/>

<sup>2</sup> Ben and Carol, Weir. *Hostage Bound Hostage Free*. 1987

<sup>3</sup> Anne Lamott. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. P. 100.