

Ladies and Gentlemen, start your engines.
Hebrews 12:1-2

Tomorrow the greatest sporting event in the United States, in terms of attendance, will once again come to our fair city. Hundreds of thousands of people will literally shut down Speedway, Indiana in anticipation of the race of all races. And tomorrow afternoon under an Indiana blue sky 33 cars will prepare to start. Everyone will join Jim Nabors in singing Back Home in Indiana and then the call will come, "Ladies and Gentlemen, start your engines." In the next few seconds the roar will literally shake every fan to the core as the cars slowly work their way around the track. And beyond the thousands gathered at the track, millions more will gather around their televisions ready to observe what promises to be another memorable race, the Indianapolis 500!

And somewhere, watching from the stands or at home there will be a young boy or girl that will watch their heroes drive at speeds well over 200mph. They will be dreaming of their day in the winner's circle drinking from a bottle of milk. And who knows, more than likely it will happen for at least a handful of them.

Our scripture today speaks of a cloud of witnesses. However, instead of them watching us to inspire them to service, they are the ones we are attempting to follow. Kind of like all the old winners of the race in the stands watching the ones who idolized them, that is the story of Hebrews 12:1-2.

In Biblical terms who are those great clouds of witnesses watching us as we race through life?

To find those names we look to Hebrews 11 where the author offers up his list:

Abel – offered a better sacrifice by faith and was commended as righteous

Enoch – by faith he pleased God, so he never experienced death

Noah – by faith he obeyed God's command and turned his back on a world of evil

Abraham – obeyed God and went where God told him to go, without knowing where this would be. He made his home in the Promised

Land even though he was a stranger there. From him came
“descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky”.

Isaac – Abraham’s promised child, who by faith blessed Jacob and Esau

Jacob – who by faith blessed Joseph’s sons

Joseph – who by faith gave instructions that his bones should one day be carried out of Egypt and buried in the Promised Land

Moses’ parents – who by faith hid Moses from the edict of Pharaoh and did not leave him to die

Moses – who, though adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter, by faith refused to be known as her son, and “chose to be mistreated along with the people of God”. By faith he kept the first Passover.

The People of Israel – who by faith passed through the Red Sea

Rahab – who by faith welcomed God’s spies, saving her family from the fall of Jericho

Also “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword... (Heb. 11:32-33)

In other words, the great cloud of witnesses are all those people who have lived before us — whether famous or not – who have lived lives of faith, following God, worshipping Jesus, leaving for us a rich spiritual legacy.

Thinking about their lives, how they lived, what they lived for, and how they died, is an inspiration. Their example shows us how to have that kind of faith and how to live it.

In addition to the faithful listed in the Bible, many Christian traditions give the title “saint” to people who have lived great lives of faith. But there are many, many more people in the “great cloud” whose names are not so well known.

I think of it almost like our military veterans: how many thousands upon thousands of people have served in the armed forces to preserve our freedom? And how many of those do we know by name? We know the famous ones, and then we know the ones who came from our own families and neighborhoods. I think the great cloud of witnesses is like that.

But then there is the flip side, there are generations coming up behind us who will have their list of witnesses. These will be the people who inspired them...who offered lives of illustration...people who showed everyday what it means to live by faith. These are the drivers in the race of life today. These people are you and me.

We have our list of witnesses that cheer us forward, but we are also still serving in that role for others. A concept that became a movie and then a foundation is "Pay it forward." What that means is do for others because of what others have done for you. We are called to live lives of compassion and caring. We are called to lived generously and faithfully. We are called to change lives because others have changed ours. The strength of Christ's ministry on earth is only as good as the present generation. And we are that generation.

Today we have been invited to start our engines, the flag has been waved, and we are on the track of life. Those who have gone before are cheering us on, and those who will take the driver's seat soon are watching how we perform. Life is a race. How will you drive it? What will other's learn from you?

Ladies and Gentlemen...start your engines!!!