

Cloud of Witnesses

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 20, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Hebrews 12:1-2](#)

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The letter to the Hebrews, typically attributed to Paul, almost certainly not written by him. It was likely written around the year 80, maybe within a generation on either side.¹ While it is unclear who the specific audience of this letter was or where they lived, it certainly seems that the author knew them well. He (it was almost certainly written by a man simply given the culture) assumes that his audience has a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Torah. The author expects them to be familiar with the story of Abraham's family, and about the details of the Exodus (what happened at Mount Sinai, Israel's journey through the wilderness, and so forth). Because of this expectation, it's most likely that this letter was written to Jewish Christians, which explains the letter's title, "to the Hebrews."²

We have clues from chapter 10, verses 32-34, that this community was facing persecution and imprisonment because of their association with Jesus and that some in the community were abandoning their commitment to The Way. Though it took several generations for the followers of Jesus to be fully separated from Judaism, the tensions between Jews who were committed to following the way of Jesus from other traditional Jews were ramping up around the time this letter was likely written.

As Vincent Harding put it, "This letter was written to ... men and women who had likely been good, upstanding members of the Jewish faith community."³ He invites us to think about being a good Jew at the time of Jesus and in the generations that followed as being similar to being a mainline Protestant in the United States today. Just as there are some members of mainline denominations who can trace their familial memberships in Congregational, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches back to the founding of the United States, there were likely among this letter's original audience those who "knew their pedigree and their family's pedigree"⁴ in Judaism all the way back to the original 12 tribes.

And these individuals were the oddballs in their families. These were "the ones who had heard the call, had seen a vision, had been told that there ... is another way to go. They had learned that '... this madman Jesus may have something to say to my life.' They had heard the call of Jesus. They had heard the call of the kingdom. And what it meant was that they had to turn away from all that had been comfortable, from all that had been

¹ Marcus Borg, *The Evolution of the Word* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 278.

² "Hebrews," *Bible Project*, <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-hebrews/> (accessed 19 September 2026).

³ Vincent Harding, "In the Company of the Faithful," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/liberating-the-word/company-faithful> (accessed 17 September 2026).

⁴ *Ibid.*

reasonable, safe, secure, and respectable. They had stepped out in a direction that was totally unpredictable, following a leader who had ended up on a cross.”⁵

How interesting, then, that the author of this letter invites these oddballs to remember their *Jewish* story of faith, not exclusively the Jesus story. Here they are, facing pressures and conflict. Some of them are rethinking their commitment to The Way. Some of them were “wondering if they should not go back into the familiar way of their fathers and mothers. Everything was much clearer in the old way; everybody knew exactly what should be done in what way because people had been doing it for thousands of years. Compared to this Christian business, [the old way] seemed a safe way, and there must have been in many minds a tremendous temptation to escape all this vilification and abuse” they were facing from their families and their culture.⁶

Responding to and resisting this contemplation of returning to the old, acceptable Jewish way of being in relationship with God, the author of this letter suggests they remember their Jewish story. The writer begins going through a list of folks who had lived in faith: Able, Enoch, and Noah – each of them oddballs in their own ways. And he turns to Abraham – someone who gave up the traditions and belief of his forebears to set out to receive an inheritance he didn’t fully understand, “not knowing where he was to go” (Hebrews 11:8).

“For all those who believe that the Christian faith is a life of security, just chew on Abraham for a little while, and hear the believer who taught us that the Christian faith is not meant to lead to a life of security; rather, it is meant to be a life of ‘creative insecurity.’ If you are secure, you don’t need grace. If you are secure, you don’t need prayer. If you are secure, you don’t need [siblings]. If you are secure, you don’t need the power of God. You’ve got it all made.

“But faith, the life of faith, is a life of walking, teetering, always not being quite sure whether or not you’ve made the right decision, but still enduring and calling out, ‘Where the hell am I, Lord? Hey! Hold my hand while I run this race, ’cause I don’t want to run this race in vain.’”⁷

“Anne Lamott reminds us, ‘The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.’ She adds, ‘Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.’”⁸

While I agree with Lamott, there are some things I’m certain about. When there’s enough empirical evidence, I’m willing to claim certainty. The problem comes when I convince myself of certainty without evidence simply because I want that false sense of security that certainty brings. And that kind of certainty is usually at odds with our call to

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Quoted in T. Denise Anderson, “A Messy Faith,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/liberating-the-word/messy-faith> (accessed 17 September 2026).

have and exercise faith. “Faith dies when there are no longer questions we must ask of God or ourselves. It is through our questions that we grope for (and eventually find) God.”⁹

“Living in faith is knowing that even though our little work, our little seed, our little brick, our little block may not make the whole thing,”¹⁰ we trust that it is part of something bigger, something of God. And so we do our little work. We plant our little seed. We form our little brick. We craft our little block. We do the things it is our turn to do, just as for ancestors did. We do the things it is our turn to do because we will one day be the ancestors of those who follow us.

This is what our text is saying to my heart, what it is speaking to my life. “Your ancestors have been building the beloved community. You stand on their shoulders. Your work is before you. Take heart. They are here, cheering you on.”

Truly, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, our ancestors in faithfulness, so let us run the race that is set before us. According to Daniel Cooperrider, “the image of the cloud of witnesses ... derives historically from the world of athletics. The author [of the letter to the Hebrews] is describing a scene reminiscent of how, in the ancient world, marathon races like the Olympics would reach their end in a stadium, with a final lap being made in the presence of the onlookers, cheering the exhausted runners on.”¹¹

We, of course, are the exhausted runners, and those cheering us on are our ancestors in the faith. It might be worth taking a moment to consider who your ancestors in the faith are. They need not be genetic ancestors; these are faith ancestors. So they might be parents or grandparents. Or they might be mentors or elders. They really can be anyone who has taught you about the Jesus way of loving God and loving your neighbors as yourself.

However, “It is curious that the metaphor used here to imagine the ancestors as clouds. More often than not in mythologies and cosmologies around the world, it’s been the stars that have symbolized the ancestors.... In the Bible, on the other hand, stars tend to be imagined less as representing those who came before us as representing the numerous ones who will come after us, as with the covenant God makes with Abraham, ‘to make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky’ (Genesis 26:4). When the Bible does imagine the ancestors, they are closer to us than the stars in the sky, a little more down to earth, a little more present and impactful on our day-to-day living – less like distant stars and more like clouds hovering just overhead.”¹²

“We need the cloud and the cloud needs us. It’s almost impossible to imagine the end of an important athletic event like an Olympic race without cheering fans to witness it....

“And so it is, our scripture suggests, for each of us as we run the races of our lives. We need the cloud of witnesses to cheer us on as much as the cloud of witnesses needs us

⁹ T. Denise Anderson, “A Messy Faith,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/liberating-the-word/messy-faith> (accessed 17 September 2026).

¹⁰ Harding, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Daniel Cooperrider, *Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2022), 163.

¹² *Ibid*, 164.

to run our race. We are both here to witness to one another. Which is to say that everything in God's creation needs everything else. We need the clouds, and we witness to the clouds, as much as the clouds need us and witness to us."¹³

The earth has been described as a blue marble suspended in the blackness of space. If we look more closely at the photographs taken of the earth from space, we see that there are four primary colors: the blue of the oceans, the greens of the forests, and browns of the grasslands and deserts, and the whites of the polar icecaps and of the clouds. "And in just about any photo of the earth taken from space, clouds cover almost three-quarters of the scene."¹⁴ The blue of the oceans comes next with the greens and browns of the continents taking a distant third.

Why do we look past the white of the clouds and call our planet, "blue"? Maybe it's because we're looking for something we recognize, and the clouds are always changing. I'd rather look to the air and see the ever-changing cloud cover as an abstract masterpiece reminding us of God's continuing creative energy at work in the world. "The clouds show us a planet alive and on the move, a planet where things are happening, an energy orb of spontaneity and possibility that also happens to be beautiful and in a fragile balance. [The clouds] also, I think, show us a planet that is aware, and awake. We need each other and we need to witness each other. It is all one big cloud of witnesses, which is one big cloud of consciousness, and we're cheered on by it, and we cheer it on, and we look up at it, and we look down upon it, and thoughts and clouds rise and fall, and consciousness yawns and stretches itself out, as our planet slowly and desperately wakes up."¹⁵

Amen.

¹³ *Ibid*, 166.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 167.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.