

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Southampton, New York**  
*“In Times of Discouragement, Remember the Witnesses”*

**Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2**

**August 14, 2016**

Well, after many years of talking about it, Sylvia and I finally took the plunge, made like millions of other New York/Long Island commuter types, and signed up for... EZ-Pass! That's right! We now have EZ-Pass tags in both of our cars; so there'll be no more white-knuckle trying to make sure that we're in the "cash only" lane every time we have to cross a bridge or use the turnpike. Never again will we have to sit behind some knucklehead paying a \$15.00 toll with a hundred dollar bill... while all the EZ-Pass cars go whipping by on our right and on our left. No, no, no. We, too, have now joined the twenty-first century... so we can avoid the unwashed masses, who are backed up in lines of bumper-to-bumper traffic, because they're too darn dumb to purchase EZ-Pass!

So, were we ever excited, as we drove out to Ohio last week, to use our EZ-Pass for the very first time... as we made the trek over the Verrazano Bridge, from Brooklyn into Staten Island. And as I eased our car into the EZ-Pass lane, I was like, *“Ha, ha, ha ‘cash only’ lane suckers! What do you think of me now? Woo-hoo!”*

Anyway, I got in one of the EZ-Pass lanes... and there was just one car in front of us. And as this car arrived at the EZ-Pass toll gate it... **stopped!** And the driver leaned over and took her EZ-Pass tag out of the glove compartment, held it up to the windshield and... **nothing happened!** At which point the driver sat in her car and... **waited!** Eventually a lady appeared from inside the toll booth, and engaged in conversation with the driver of the stopped car. The driver then got out of her car... and went into the toll booth! She emerged with a clipboard, on which she proceeded to fill out various forms. A credit card was produced; a bill was signed and a receipt was given. After maybe, eight, ten minutes... the gate finally rose, and the young woman ahead of us was once again on her way.

Now, you're probably wondering why we didn't just pull out of that lane, and go through a different toll booth that wasn't jammed up. Well, I would have... but I couldn't! There were cars lined up behind me, and I had concrete barriers on either side. So all we could do was sit, and wait, and throw up our hands in frustration! And, all the while, in the "cash only" lane right next to us... the cars just kept on going past. One, after another, after another, after another.

Now, in light of all our prior EZ-Pass enthusiasm, this was a pretty discouraging experience! I mean, how unlucky do you have to be, for your very first EZ-Pass venture to take ten times longer than the "cash only" lane? Although, we did have to laugh at the irony of it all; and the first thing I said to Sylvia after we finally made it past the toll booth was, *“This is a sermon illustration, for sure!”* (And so it is!) But, it **was** discouraging... even though, in the scheme of things, it was hardly a big or serious deal; it was just a minor delay. Nevertheless, our EZ-Pass experience does serve to remind us that **discouragement** is an unavoidable part of life.

Not that we don't know this already, of course we do; but it's worth remembering anyway, because sometimes we like to think that, as Christian disciples, we should get a break on discouragement. Like maybe that, for Christians, there's some kind of EZ-Pass lane through discouragement... so that it won't be so bad, and won't last so long. We've probably all felt that way at one time or another; like, hey, I believe in God, and I put my faith in Jesus... shouldn't there be some kind of discount on discouragement for someone like me? Some kind of a rebate or free pass that's not available to all the poor schmucks who're stuck in the "cash only" lane of religious indifference, or agnosticism, or other forms of disbelief?

If God is so good, and I believe in Him... why do I have to wait in the discouragement line along with everybody else? A lot of religiously faithful people have asked this question. In fact, I'll bet that every last one of us here today has asked it at one time or another; I know I have.

And the problem which arises, for some people, when we realize that we don't get an EZ-Pass on discouragement, even when we *do* believe in God... is that we call our belief in God into question. We call God Himself into question. And that's a problem, which can do great damage to our faith... and our ongoing life of Christian discipleship. Which is what makes our lesson this morning, from the Letter to the Hebrews, so meaningful and important. Because in this text, the writer reminds us, by referencing a string of faithful and godly biblical characters... that our Heavenly Father loves us and is with us, even in the most discouraging moments that life can ever throw at us.

*"No matter what," our writer says, "our God will never forsake us. And He will see us through our most difficult days, and our most troublesome times, and our most perilous periods. Just as He always has... with the people who love Him and serve Him."*

And then, beginning with Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Moses in a section of chapter 11 that we didn't read; and continuing through the Exodus, and the conquest of Jericho, and the exploits of the judges, kings, and prophets of ancient Israel in the section that we did read; the writer hammers the point home, over and over again, that God's beloved people have always lived and walked by faith... even in times of great disaster, despair, and... discouragement.

And having to maintain our faith in the face of discouragement isn't an exception, an anomaly, or a fluke, he says... its standard operating procedure for life as a child of God! But we can handle it, because thorough it all, and in it all, our God will not let us go... ever! And in order to help his readers in the first century then, and his readers in the twenty-first century now, keep that truth firmly and forever in mind... he encourages us to "remember the witnesses!" Remember all the saints, and heroes, and superstars of the faith... who faced the same discouragement that you are facing, and kept hanging in there; in faith, in hope, in trust.

*"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses (meaning all of God's people whom he's just mentioned in his letter), since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author (RSV – 'pioneer') and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."*

In other words, you and I and every other Christian believer, is literally surrounded, encircled, by a whole flock, an entire throng of spiritual forebears who've been right where we are today! Who've walked smack in the same footsteps that we're walking in today! Who've dealt with the challenges, who've suffered the grief, who've shouldered the burdens that now bow us under their weight.

And through it all, who've somehow managed to hang on, if only by a thread on some days... to their faith and their hope in Almighty God. **Remember those people...** the letter writer says, when **you** are in the pits of discouragement yourself. Remember them... and be encouraged. For if they survived it... so can you. Remember them... and be comforted. For if they could bear it... so can you. Remember them... and keep your faith alive. For if they could keep the door of their heart open just a crack to God... so can you! Remember them and know... that **you are not alone**. God is with you. The Lord Jesus is with you. Your brothers and sisters in faith are with you. And because they are... you shall not fall.

So, where are we discouraged this morning? Where could we use a little help and encouragement to keep our feet moving forward on the path of Christian discipleship? The answer will be different for each of us... but one thing that's certain for us all is that, someday, somehow, we will benefit from a little "remembering of the witnesses."

So as we make our way through these remaining weeks of summer, let's remember the people of faith who've gone before. Let's try to see our own situation from the larger perspective of God's long history of faithfully loving His people. And let's keep trusting the One who's walked every step of the way of our life with us... and who's not retiring from that job now, or ever!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!