

May 9, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [I John 5:1-8](#)

TITLE: A Trio of Witnesses

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

In last week's *New York Times Magazine*, there was an article celebrating the amazing fact that during the last 100 years the average human life span has doubled. A century ago, babies born to a poor family in Bombay or Delhi often didn't survive into their 20s; today's average life expectancy in India is 70 years. In England or America you did well to live into your 40s; today many enjoy life expectancies in the low 80s. How was all this accomplished? In reality, not by something big but rather by little things—a vaccine shot that meant you didn't die of smallpox; an antibiotic pill that meant an accidental scrape didn't become a lethal bacterial infection; the chlorine additive that meant your glass of drinking water didn't poison you with cholera. The journalist described it as “an invisible shield that has been built, piece by piece, over the last century, keeping us ever safer and further from death.”¹

What's interesting about this is that the current pandemic has suddenly made the invisible shield visible. Living a long and healthy life is now seen to be dependent on lots of little things and the good work of lots of anonymous people: medical scientists, hospital workers, drugstore employees, public health officials, and so on. We now see more clearly how our lives are interconnected and how we're all in this together. Over the past century, it wasn't just one thing that increased human life expectancy; it was lots of things—a chorus of voices, hundreds of acts, the example of those who've gone before us plus our commitment to care for those who will follow after us—all of this was necessary for human life to increase.

In the same way, no one comes to faith because of one single thing. Faith is the result of lots and lots of little things; or as it says in the book of Hebrews, of a “great cloud of witnesses.” Think about the path each of you took that led you to this Sunday worship service. It involved centuries of Christians teaching the faith to the next generation, scholars writing works of theology, preachers offering homilies and sermons. It involved people telling stories about Christ, writing down gospels, translating the bible into countless languages, creating works of art and architecture to physically embody this good news. It involved families coming to church, Sunday school teachers, sitting in pews while attending a wedding or a funeral. It involved rituals like saying the Lord's Prayer, sharing the bread and cup of communion, or watching the waters of baptism being poured onto countless heads.

Now, not all these things have been done perfectly. There have been lots and lots of bad sermons preached—sorry about that. There have been lots of bad theologies proclaimed within church walls—racist, anti-gay, anti-women, nationalistic folderol and foolishness. But God has not been defeated by these things. The invisible shield of faith has not been broken by the sins and failings of the ages. No, it remains strong thanks to the grace of God and, as we heard in the reading from I John, thanks to a particular trio of witnesses.

The writer of I John speaks about three things that proclaim what we believe as Christians—water, blood, and the Spirit. Let's start with water. Today we celebrated several baptisms. We poured water into a font and spoke about being cleansed, washed from sin, welcomed into a community. That act has literally been done for millennia – from the Jewish rites of washing before entering the temple or synagogue to the washing by John the Baptist in the river Jordan, to the baptism of millions of Christians—babies and adults alike—over the past centuries. We aren't simply born into the faith; it's not handed to us like a birth certificate. No, we enter into faith through rituals like being baptized – through parents bringing us or stepping up to the font on our own—a one time initiation event that takes a lifetime to finish.

In the act of Christian baptism are echoes of all the other times we've been washed, bathed, or showered in water. Remember what it was like to play in a bathtub as a kid, or to wash your own child, niece or nephew—to splash, to scrub, to put in bubble bath, to be dried off and wrapped in a towel, to be loved and nurtured. These acts are witnesses of being made clean, of belonging. These are witnesses of faith.

Now consider the witness of blood. The I John scripture writer is likely referring here to the sacrifice of Christ's blood, shed when he was crucified on the cross. We talk about that act as a sacrifice of love, of blood shed for us. Blood courses through all our bodies. It circulates wondrously through arteries and veins, moving oxygen to our organs and as such is the very stuff of life. We've shed blood by cuts, scrapes, and gashes, and used band-aids or stitches to keep the blood safely inside our bodies. We've given blood to help others. We speak of caring for family members who are blood relatives; we've wept for blood shed by soldiers on our behalf and by innocent victims harmed on streets where we live.

Think about the times you've had to deal with blood—when your own blood pressure is perhaps too high, when a crying child comes to you with a bad cut, or a hospital procedure requires a transfusion. It's all serious stuff. It's humbling, because it's a reminder of how fragile we are. The memory of Christ's sacrifice calls to mind the other sacrifices we've known in our life: a mother's blood and placenta shed while giving birth, the hours parents worked to provide for us, the sacrifices made by invisible members of our community to help put food on our table, stock medicine on store shelves, remove trash from our streets. Water and blood—in Christ's life and in our lives—are both witnesses of faith.

Now to these two witnesses a third is added—the Spirit. The Spirit is found all through the bible. It's there moving over the face of the deep calling forth a creation that includes us. It's there in the souls stirred by the words of Christ, the lives healed and transformed by his touch, his presence, and his love. It is there in the quickened breath of the women rushing from the tomb on Easter to tell the others that Christ has arisen. It is there in the wind-swept room on Pentecost when frightened disciples found the courage to go out into the streets with the news of resurrection hope for a hurting world. It is

there in the prayers we speak in church and in homes, in the connection that binds us together no matter the distance between us.

Think of the Spirit that brought you to this day. Today is Mother's Day. You likely have rituals of your own for today—giving flowers or cards, making a call to a living mother-figure in your life, offering a prayer remembering mothers and grandmothers already deceased. Maybe the Spirit moves you to tell stories today—about what it was like growing up, what first brought you and your spouse together, what happened on graduation day or when you started a new job, what was said that sticks with you from a funeral of a loved one, what you hope as you look around at our troubled nation—look beyond this pandemic—look into the eyes of children who will inherit this world soon enough.

The Spirit that moves through all those words and stories is the same Spirit that moved over the waters of creation, that blew forth from the empty tomb on Resurrection Sunday, that inspires in poetry, music and song. It is hope—it is confidence—it is truth—it is the Spirit of new life in Christ. With water and blood, it too is a witness of faith.

In conclusion: Think about all of this in this way: There were many things that led to the doubling of life expectancy over the past century—scientists and activists, reformers changing laws, women and men protecting their children by washing hands, getting our shots, quitting smoking, cleaning our water, wearing masks during pandemics. Lots of things were witnesses to good health that have led to longer lives for us all.

There are also several witnesses for the Christian faith. It has never been just one act, one moment in time, one person—even the Son of God. It has always been a group effort, a salvation history unfolding over the years. Occasionally we focus our attention to celebrate the rich heritage of our faith—such as when we see the water glistening on a head newly baptized, when we taste the bread and juice known as the body and blood of a sacrificed Savior, when our Spirits are lifted and our lips proclaim good news of hope, love, and life to one another. These are an important trio of witnesses—water, blood, spirit. And all of them involve you—include you—and depend on you. This is the way of faith that conquers the world. To follow it is not burdensome or hard. So come, join the great cloud of witnesses. It's where you've always been meant to be.

¹ Steven Johnson, "The Living Century," *New York Times Magazine*, May 2, 2021, p. 15.