

## *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*

*Hebrews 11 selected verses, 12:1-2 (The Message)*

*The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd.*

*By faith, we see the world called into existence by God's word, what we see created by what we don't see. By an act of faith, Abel brought a better sacrifice to God than Cain. It was what he believed, not what he brought, that made the difference. By an act of faith, Enoch skipped death completely. "They looked all over and couldn't find him because God had taken him." By faith, Noah built a ship in the middle of dry land. He was warned about something he couldn't see, and acted on what he was told.*

*By an act of faith, Abraham said yes to God's call to travel to an unknown place that would become his home. By faith, barren Sarah was able to become pregnant, old woman as she was at the time, because she believed the One who made a promise would do what he said. By faith, Abraham, at the time of testing, offered Isaac back to God. Acting in faith, he was as ready to return the promised son, his only son, as he had been to receive him.*

*By an act of faith, Isaac reached into the future as he blessed Jacob and Esau. By an act of faith, Jacob on his deathbed blessed each of Joseph's sons with God's blessing. By faith, Moses refused the privileges of the Egyptian royal house. He chose a hard life with God's people rather than an opportunistic soft life of sin with the oppressors. By an act of faith, Israel walked through the Red Sea on dry ground.*

*By faith, the Israelites marched around the walls of Jericho for seven days, and the walls fell flat. By an act of faith, Rahab, the Jericho harlot, welcomed the spies and escaped the destruction that came on those who refused to trust God. I could go on and on, but I've run out of time. There are so many more - Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets...*

*Through acts of faith, they toppled kingdoms, made justice work, took the promises for themselves. They were protected from lions, fires, and sword thrusts, turned disadvantage to advantage, won battles, routed alien armies.*

*Do you see what this means - all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running - and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed - that exhilarating finish in and with God - he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!*

142 years ago, it was a different world. In 1881:

- New Mexico was a territory and people's primary transportation was on foot or horse back.
- James A. Garfield was inaugurated as the 20<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Eleven weeks later he died from a gun shot wound. He was succeeded by Vice President Chester A. Arthur.
- Billy the Kid escaped from the Lincoln County Jail in Mesilla, NM. Three months later he was killed by Pat Garrett outside Fort Sumner.
- The American Red Cross was established by Clara Barton.
- Sioux chief Sitting Bull surrendered to US troops in Montana.
- The fifth hurricane of the Atlantic season hit Florida and the Carolinas, killing 700.
- The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral happened in Tombstone, Arizona.
- The Thumb Fire in Michigan destroyed over a million acres and killed 282.
- Cecil B. DeMille, Pablo Picasso, and Pope John XXIII were born.
- First Presbyterian Church ABQ was chartered.

Our church was founded on July the 4th. Three years earlier, the Santa Fe Railroad reached New Mexico when the first locomotive crossed Raton Pass. Our founding pastor, the Reverend John Milton Shields and his family rode the Santa Fe line to Las Vegas. They took stage coach to Bernalillo, and finally a wagon to the Jemez Pueblo. They started a Presbyterian church, school and medical clinic in 1878. Three years later Rev. Shields traveled up the valley and started another church, school, and clinic.

This weekend we celebrate 142 years of God's work in the Jemez valley. We gather to remember and give thanks for what God has done through the pioneers and veterans who have gone before us.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says our identity comes from our collective memory. "If you want to know a person's story," he wrote, "you cannot understand who they are apart from their connection to their past". In other words, if you want to answer the question "who am I or who are we?" then you have to imagine and remember your past.

For instance, if you want to learn about being an American, you need to learn the stories of the pilgrims and the Natives who welcomed them. You need to learn about George Washington and Deborah Sampson, Abraham Lincoln and Harriet Tubman and all the other heroes and heroines in our nation's history.

If you want to learn what it means to be a New Mexican, you need to learn stories of the pueblos, as well as, the Hispanic conquerors and Anglo settlers. You have to spend time at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque, and the Natural History Museum in Santa Fe.

We're all linked and connected to the people who have gone before us. Our predecessors not only form our memory but our identity.

The same is true of Christians. You and I are connected with the past and we have a collective story. The fact is none of us would be here if it wasn't for Rev. Shields and the women and men, children and young people who worshipped and prayed, learned and served in this congregation. Yes, you and I are standing on the shoulder of giants.

Sir Isaac Newton is credited with that phrase. In 1675, he wrote a letter to fellow scientist giving credit to those who had come before him. "If I have seen further," he said, "it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

Newton improvised what Bernard of Chartres, a 12th century French Philosopher, wrote. He compared his contemporaries to "[little people] perched on the shoulders of giants. [He said] we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature."

Whoever came up with it, the metaphor – standing on the shoulders of giants – speaks to us today. It also connects with our reading from the letter to the Hebrews. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter, the author presents a spiritual biography and lists some of the giants in our faith.

The author understands you have to know about the faith of Abel, Enoch and Noah to know yourself. You have to know about the faith of Abraham and Sarah to know who you are as a child of God. You have to include Rebecca and Isaac, Miriam and Moses plus all the rest of your spiritual family tree, to be a follower of Jesus.

Our forefathers and foremothers in the faith include the shoulders of the Rev. Shelton Jackson, a Presbyterian minister who organized our denomination's mission work throughout the western United States over 140 years ago. Jackson visited the Jemez pueblo a year before sending the Rev. Shields to share God's Good News in word and deed.

Other Presbyterian giants include ministers like Paul Berry who may not have been an ordained pastor but faithfully served this congregation and community from 1920-1945, the Rev. David Bean who rode a motorcycle to church but died unexpectedly, the Rev. Jessie Chrisman who was a labor organizer before serving as Clerk of Session, or the Rev. Bill Sawyier who was pastor when this sanctuary and addition were built.

Our pioneers and veterans include countless elders and ministers who faithfully preached and taught and offered pastoral care to this community. I was blessed to stand on all their shoulders for almost 20 years. And now it is Takako's time.

Such giants are not just pastors, but leaders and members of this congregation. Some are still with us and others have gone before us. Our spiritual giants include founding families like the Shields, Montoyas, Fentons, Caldwells, Sandovals, and Millers, plus countless others who gathered here over the years to worship, serve and give.

We're standing on the shoulders of Jose Archuleta, who gave the original land for this church, plus Don and Marie Mathias who made a donation in 1969 that double our property.

We're standing on the shoulders of Dale Lewis whose portrait hangs downstairs. She and other moms like Diane and Ruby brought their kids to this church when it was nothing but older folk. They didn't like the noisy children, but Rev. Diehl said if they didn't welcome the disruptive

newcomers, they were going to die. Needless to say, this aging congregation open their arms and their hearts. A new era of growth happened in the church including this facility we enjoy.

We're standing on the shoulders of Dick and DH Ford. Dick was God's construction manager when this building was built. DH was the servant heart of this congregation prayerfully caring for others in this valley well into her eighties.

We're standing on the shoulders of Bill Turner and Emmett Cart created our crooked cross from a tree that was cut down when this sanctuary was built. They wanted to remind us that none of us are perfect and we're all in need of God's grace.

We're standing on the shoulders of wheelchair-bound Ed Brown who made sure this place was made handicap accessible, including the first elevator in Jemez Springs. Surely, we can use that claim to fame as some kind of fundraiser, can't we? "Experience History! Ride the Original Jemez Elevator!"

We're standing on the shoulders of Thema O'Neil who was God's messenger of encouragement, love and hope sending cards and notes to hundreds of people over the years.

We're standing on the shoulders of Helen Adams and Beverly Musgrove who have shared their gifts of music and helped this congregation sing praise to God. I believe Bev has been doing it for 30 years.

We are standing on the shoulders of hundreds of people who faithfully gave money to the church. Their names are too numerous to mention, but they gave generously and willingly to this church's ministry and mission. When I started, we had \$110,000 in savings which is how you were able to keep this church operating and support me as a part-time pastor for almost 20 years.

As Shannon preached two weeks ago, it's time to for a major gifts campaign – giving above and beyond one's usual church donations. We will reach out to everyone who has had a relationship with this church and invite them to give to ensure the work of this congregation, to maintain this facility, and to continue Takako's ministry into the future. I hope you will join us!

Beloved, this church has not only endured, but prospered for 142 years because of the faithful giants who were drawn to beautiful valley and to this faith community. If we see farther or accomplished more, it is because of them.

As your soon-to-be pastor emeritus, I am grateful for this church's rich history, for the shoulders of giants we stand on, and for the time I got to serve here. But I am even more hopeful for what this church will be in the future. I am convinced that after 142 years God's work is still to be done, and your greatest days as a faith community are in front of you!

The giants of this church are not just in the past. There are giants in this church today. You are today's Abraham and Sarah. You are today's Rev. Shields and Rev. Sawyer. You are today's Dick and DH Ford. You are today's Emmet Cart and Thelma O'Neal.

Yes, you are the giants on whose shoulders the next generation will stand. You are a people of vision and courage. You are a people of faith and conviction. You are a people of hope and promise. And you are not alone. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us:

“Do you see what this means - all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans, cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running - and never quit! Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed - that exhilarating finish in and with God...(and) when you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again...That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!”

And empower you to be the shoulders on which this church's future stands! Hallelujah! Amen!

July 2, 2023 (Church's 142th Anniversary)  
David Whiteley, Pastor Emeritus