The preacher Fred Craddock, tells a story of a little boy who was carried on his father’s shoulders into a country store. The man behind the counter said to the little boy, "My, aren’t you tall today?" And the little boy replied sheepishly, "Well, it isn’t all me." There is whole lot of truth is those simple words spoken by a child. Who we are and what we accomplish is never all our own doing. We are boosted up by those who have come before.

The writer of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews is writing to early Christians whose faith was threatened by hardship, persecution, and an extension of the expected time of the second coming. Last week we heard our author say: Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Then he calls the audience to connect with those who have gone before. The early Christians in the Roman Empire were facing a difficult and trying future. There weren’t very many of them. They were poor, weak, increasingly marginalized by their own communities, and as they grew increasingly Rome regarded them as seditious. Jesus was gone and hadn’t come back as quickly as some expected. All the Apostles were dead now. And the author of Hebrews, in this eleventh chapter, reminds them of their ancestors, their faith:

- By faith Abraham and Sarah moved and Moses led.
- By faith your people passed through the sea.
- By faith Gideon, Samson, and David led and fought and followed faithfully.
- By faith your own fathers and mothers were persecuted, tortured, martyred and endured.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us also lay aside every weight and sin and. . . let us run with perseverance the race that is before us.”
We have this “cloud of witnesses” ... a heavenly grandstand full of folks, both past and present cheering us on. We have this race to run...this spiritual journey to travel. And for sure, this race is a distance relay more than sprint. It’s a community effort, not a solo run. And then, the writer adds another piece to the picture. While running the race together, with all the support from the grandstands, from those who have given their lives faithfully and cheer us on, the writer adds, “Look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of our faith.” As we run our part of the race, we keep the image of the amazing effort and faith of Christ, who even with nails through his hands and feet, hanging on a cross, said, father forgive them, for they know not what they do. And so too, the son of God, having completed this tremendous earthly leg of the relay, is the sign of victory to which we run. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

William Wilberforce introduced legislation in the British Parliament to end the slave trade. In 1779 when he first introduced the bill, he was shouted down and laughed at. He was ridiculed and ostracized from polite society. But he continued, year after year from 1779 until 1807 when the tide of public opinion had in fact changed. And he continued after that to argue for the end of slavery itself--not just the slave trade, but the end of slavery itself--which happened in the British Empire in 1833, just a few days before his death. No doubt Wilberforce and all those who fought for racial equality are cheering us on today, as we resist divisive forces and gather as a part of Boca on Tues August 20 at the Fruitvale Bart Station to kick off the bus tour headed to Washington in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington.

At one point in the midst of the Wilberforce’s struggle, when the cause seemed to be hopeless, John Wesley, the Anglican priest, father of Methodism, sent a letter to William Wilberforce to encourage him. Wesley said:

"Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? Be not weary in well doing! Go on, go on in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish before it."

Wesley's words were a summons to faith despite the odds. Faith is not a guarantee. Paul Tillich in his book The Courage to Be taught that faith is a daring act of courage. It is the courage to affirm being in spite of the threat of non-being, the courage to affirm life in spite of death, the courage to affirm hope in spite of despair. Faith is the courage to take our share of responsibility, confess our shortcomings, and allow God to change us. While everyone else is seeking out scapegoats and blaming others, it is the courage to stand up and speak up, when everyone else just shuts up. Faith is doing the small things, playing a part, because the part needs to be played for big things to happen. Faith is courage to be honest and love, to seek peace and justice even when it is complicated and when our success is not clear. Faith is not proof. But faith has power, power born of a God who gives it.
We gain courage by remembering all those who prepared the way for us. We are surrounded by all those we loved and have lost ... the great cloud of witnesses. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, cheering us on: Those who strove in faith for the great cause of God, even though it might not be accomplished or achieved in their lifetime. Most of us don’t even know the people who built and kept this church open for worship and serving the community in faith for the last 100 years. But be assured that great and amazing things have happened because faithful people were willing to step up and serve God. We carry on the legacy which doesn’t mean staying stuck in the past but living faithfully like they did in response to the challenges of our time. They finished their life as faithfully as they could, but they haven’t finished the job. There were things they didn’t see, things they couldn’t do, so we take the baton and carry on. Faithful we join the communion of saints.

And each one of us is surrounded too by our own cloud of witnesses, some living some in the great heavenly cloud: our parents, our grandparents, our aunts and uncles, our teachers, mentors, friends near and far, whoever, who found faith and courage to adopt a daughter, immigrate, work at tough jobs and resisted spending to save up for children’s education, fought off Hitler, built an infrastructure and marched for civil rights: People who inspired us and loved us enough to expect much of us and prodded us to be all we could be. And so now, despite the trials and diversions we face, it is our time to hold the faith, to take the next faithful step with the joy of serving God.

A reading from “A Great Cloud of Witnesses” by Barbara Brown Taylor.

What makes a saint?
Extravagance.
Excessive love, flagrant mercy, radical affection,
exorbitant charity, immoderate faith, intemperate hope,
inordinate love.
None of which is an achievement, a badge to be earned or a trophy to be sought; all are secondary by-products of the one thing that truly makes a saint, which is the love of God,
which is membership in the body of Christ,
which is what all of us, living and dead, remembered and forgotten, great souls and small, have in common.
Some of us may do more with that love than others and may find ourselves able to reflect it in a way that causes others to call us saints, but the title is one that has been given to us all by virtue of our baptisms. The moment we rose dripping from the holy water we joined the communion of saints, and we cannot go back any more than we can give back our names or the blood in our veins.
(The great cloud of witnesses includes us all)
clan made kin by Christ’s blood.
There are heroes and scoundrels at the party, beloved aunts and estranged cousins,
relatives we adore and those who plainly baffle us.
They are all ours, and we are all included.
... we worship amidst a great fluttering of wings,
with the whole host of heaven crowding the air above our heads.
Call their names and hear them answer “Present.”
... they belong to us and we to them,
and as their ranks swell so do the possibilities that open up in our own lives.
Because of them
and because of one another
and because of the God who binds us all together
we can do more than any of us had dreamed to do alone.