The Little League World Series is underway in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Representing the Great Lakes region is a team from Grosse Pointe, Michigan. Unfortunately they were eliminated from the tournament yesterday.

I like baseball; I like the Detroit Tigers; but I really like watching the kids play. Although some of them are tall and big enough that I’m not sure they could be called kids. There is a pitcher for Grosse Pointe who is 6 ft 2 inches tall. And Chula Vista, California, has a pitcher who is 6 ft 4 inches tall. Both of them are only 13 years old.

The tournament is a time when boys' hearts and egos are on the line. The same player can drop a fly ball in the first inning and hit a game-winning double in the sixth inning.

A story is told about a certain ten-year-old who had ridden the bench most of the season. But in the championship game, his coach finally called him up to bat.

The little boy's whole extended family had turned out for this very special game. His parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, second cousins—they were all there, cheering and clapping and shouting words of encouragement.

The little boy swallowed his anxiety and stepped up to the plate. He gripped the bat and stared hard at the pitcher.

Whoosh! The pitch flew by him. Strike one!

From the stands, his family cheered him on. “You can do it! You can do it!”

So he lifted his bat again and waited for the pitch.

Again he swung and connected with thin air. Strike two!

His shoulders started to slump and his hands began to sweat, as he stared down the pitcher one last time.

Whoosh! Strike three!

The other team jumped and shouted for joy, while the little boy's teammates gave him the silent treatment as they left the field.

Our little batter slumped over on the dugout bench, put his head in his hands, and began to cry. But his crying was interrupted by the sound of his father’s voice: “Son,” he said, “the game’s not over.”
Lifting his head, the boy saw his family—all of them—even his frail grandmother, spread out across the field, waiting to play. They began cheering loudly as the boy picked up his bat. His father pitched the ball, and the boy swung. Crack!

The ball flew into the outfield, and the boy took off for first base. As he rounded the bases, cousins, uncles and aunts shouted words of encouragement. Somehow, all those able adults were unable to corral the ball he had hit. As the boy headed for home base, his father stood behind the plate with open arms. They celebrated his home run by lifting him on their shoulders and carrying him around the field.

That’s a “feel-good” story, as is the 11th chapter of Hebrews where the writer gives us dynamic examples of Old Testament men and women who did great works for God by faith.

Then he begins chapter 12 with these words that give us our text for today: “THEREFORE, 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 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.”

It’s a vivid picture. In the grandstand of our lives there are cheerleaders: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, and other Old Testament heroes, as well as Paul, Peter, and leaders of the New Testament church. And we might add, there are loved ones, family and friends, who have gone before us.

We are not alone in our faith journey. No matter how discouraging the events of our lives are, we can make it through with the encouragement of those who have gone before. “Therefore, 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.”

Nowadays when someone mentions the word “cloud” our thoughts are inclined to the world of computers and the internet. Now we store a lot of our private information—personal, financial, medical, and emotional—into “the cloud.”

What I find fascinating about this phenomenon is that we have come to trust artificial intelligence over human intelligence. We don't take much “on faith” anymore from human sources. Anything a politician or a government bureaucrat or a corporate CEO or now even an athlete says is immediately suspicious and suspect.

Network media, government warnings and recommendations of professionals like doctors, lawyers, financial advisors, tarot card readers—these days we take them all with a hefty helping of salt. But we do seem to place faith in our electronics.
In today’s text from the Book of Hebrews it is that degree of faith that the author holds up as part of our great “cloud of witnesses.” Ordinary people did extraordinary deeds out of faith in the God who had delivered a future.

In the ancient world this was an even more astonishing idea than it is today. The ancient “gods” were a capricious lot — sometimes finding favor with individual humans, sometimes purposefully setting them up for failure.

Albert Einstein once declared that God “did not play dice with the universe.” But for Zeus and his lot it was a non-stop Las Vegas on Olympus. They played “dice” with everyone.

The “gods,” like their human counterparts, are back-biting, secretly scheming, ultimately betraying, quick-silver changing, completely untrustworthy, and wholly unfaithful to the human population they supposedly governed. It was utter foolishness to have “faith” in those gods. It was the very essence of wisdom to fear those gods.

The sacred and singular relationship between Yahweh, the Creator God, and those who honored God, changed that notion of little “g” “god” forever. The long list of those who chose to have faith in God’s promises and God’s presence given in today’s text is just the smallest slice of a history of real relationships between people of faith and a faithful God.

Through the history of Israel humanity slowly learned that God was faithful and deserving of our faith. In victory and in defeat, in triumph and through tortures, God’s presence never faltered, and human faith had an unfailing anchor.

Living a life “by faith” opens doors to amazing possibilities.

- A “by faith” life gives us an attitude of “yes” instead of “no.”
- A “by faith” life opens us up to receptiveness instead of defensiveness.
- A “by faith” life addresses challenges and real hardships with the spirit-set (not “mind-set”) of “why not” and moves forward instead of bewailing “why me?” and collapsing in defeat.

The examples of “faithfulness” given in today’s epistle text are all over the map. Those specifically named experienced true triumphs and affirmations because of their faith. But they also fell flat with their failures. Everybody has failures.

A life of faith is not a perfectly lived life. But it is a life that knows how to re-set itself when things go off track. Faithfulness is not a state of being but a state of becoming. Faithfulness is an ever ongoing process of reset and reboot.

The author of Hebrews extols the ongoing power and presence of this great “cloud of witnesses” who help us define and defend our faithfulness in our lives. We don’t live “in” the past. But we live “out of” the past, and the voice and values of “The Cloud” ought to shape and steer us.
How many of us have entrusted by faith all our most important, sensitive, personal information to “the cloud?” How many of us regularly back-up all our e-files, all our financial information, all our doodled and noodled thoughts and dreams and schemes, to “the cloud” every day?

But the electronic “cloud” that saves all that is our digital life is nothing compared to the spiritual “cloud” that gives a firm foundation and trusted firmament to our faithfulness.

Theologian Ruben Alves put the difference between faith and hope like this: “Hope is hearing the melody of the future; faith is dancing to that melody here and now.”

Will we dance to the future this morning? Will we live by faith and not by sight? Will we trust God with all we are? Will we get our heads in “the Cloud?”