



"Surrounded by Examples"

Based on Hebrews 12:1-2a and Isaiah 43:1-3
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Well, Broad Street, thanks for inviting me to be in your pulpit to share this special day for Brittany. I remember the first time I did a wedding for family, and thinking... "wow, all of our family is here, if I mess up, I'll hear about it for ever..." and today, not only is Brittany's family here in person, and her friends and family are joining online around the country but also, her boss, her colleagues, her church, and some of my church members are here... No Pressure, right?!

I want to begin with a story about Brittany's favorite person, not me, not our children though they come extremely close. It is about our family's beloved Dog, Korra.

Korra has this ritual that she does every day.

In the morning, when we get our shoes on to go for a walk, she reads our body language and starts to get excited. And of course she does, It's the best part of her day.

But then we go to the door, we take her leash off the hook, and it's like affirmation that she is getting what she hoped for, takes her over the edge and causes her to do the most curious thing. She bows.

Her front paws stretch out, and she moves into the literal downward dog pose holding it for a moment until she shivers.

At first, I laughed at this behavior because it struck me as funny and odd. But as it has continued (now for years), I've learned to appreciate it. Maybe she's just stretching, and I shouldn't over think it. But for whatever reason I have And I'm taking it as a lesson she has been trying to teach me.

Before the walk she pauses. She bows. She takes a moment to pay respect.

Lately as she bows... I've taken it as my own time... To pause. To appreciate the moment. To show gratitude and reverence in this small slice of time her bow allows us to carve out of the day.

"We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses," Hebrews tells us. Or as the scripture reading today explained... we have all these great people around us as examples. Their lives tell us what faith means.

I know our dog is an atypical teacher, and probably not who the author of Hebrews imagined. But her teaching me this lesson has got me to reflect on all the teachers in that great cloud that have shaped us and taught us what life of faith means.

And on this day we mark Brittany's transition into pastoral ministry. I think immediately of all the teachers who have surrounded Brittany. The folks who have accompanied her on her journey and allowed her to get to this point.

Frankly... Brittany has had an absurd abundance of teachers in her life. And I mean that literally. Both of Brittany's parents worked as teachers, with her mom Ruth, teaching English as a second language and her dad Joe teaching culinary arts. And then there's more than half of Brittany's aunts, Tissa, Mimi, Katie and Rosie who all worked as teachers. It's no wonder Brittany and her sister Adrienne also went into teaching, It was literally the example of almost every adult you knew!

You were surrounded by a great cloud of instructors. Not to mention your actual schoolteachers, your coaches, and your youth group leaders and camp counselors and Sunday school teachers and seminary professors, and pastors and mentors. All these folks who shaped you through their lessons, and their lives.

For thirteen years now, many of you have watched Brittany do the same for others in this church.

You've seen her kneel to a child's eye level to explain that they are beloved. You've watched her pile teenagers into vans for conferences, or plane for immersion trips.

You've seen her teaching people that faith in Christ means hands and feet in mutual service. You've heard her preach children's messages that somehow spoke just as well to the adults in the room: because the gospel is always simpler and more profound than we make it.

It's fitting that Presbyterians call their pastors "Teaching Elders" because in so many ways, this is what Brittany has already been all along. Teaching & Leading. From the beginning of life to the end of life. The church is simply catching up to what God has known about Brittany forever. Teaching is that core to her, it's like it's in her DNA.

And that's the thing about teachers who they are, they embody the lessons. The best ones don't just pass down information; they pass down something of themselves. They show us, through their lives, what's possible. What's valuable. What's worth dedicating yourself to.

I know Brittany learned that from watching the cloud of witnesses around her. And now she's become part of that cloud for countless others.

But let me ask you: Who taught you what faith means?

Take a moment and think. Whose life showed you what it looks like to trust God when the road gets hard? Who taught you to pray, not with their words, but with their presence? Who saw something in you that you couldn't see yet in yourself?

Maybe it was a parent or grandparent. Maybe a pastor or youth leader. Maybe it was someone who only crossed your path for a season but left a mark that never faded. Maybe it was someone sitting in this room right now. Maybe, like your dog's daily bow, it was something small from someone unexpected that taught you to pause, to appreciate, to recognize the sacred in the ordinary.

This is the gift Hebrews offers us: the reminder that we are never running this race alone. We are always surrounded... surrounded! ... by examples, by witnesses, by people whose faith has made our own faith possible. We stand on the shoulders of giants.

The beautiful thing is that you are part of that cloud too. Right now, someone is running their race because of your example, because you helped to show them the way.

The race of life isn't easy. The writer of Hebrews is honest about that. There are things that slow us down. There are obstacles that trip us up. There are rivers to cross and fires to walk through.

But listen to what God says through the prophet Isaiah: "Don't be afraid. I saved you. I named you. You are mine."

You are mine.

Before Brittany ever stood in a pulpit, God claimed her, as God's own. Before she ever led a retreat or counseled a struggling teenager, God said: "You are mine."

And the same is true for you. Before you knew what your calling was, God knew. Before you were ready, God was preparing you. Before you believed you were capable, God was already equipping you. "When you cross rivers, you will not be hurt. When you walk through fire, you will not be burned."

Not because the rivers won't be deep. Not because the fires won't be hot. But because God is with us in them.

Ordination is a strange and wonderful thing. On one level, it changes nothing. Brittany has been doing this work for years now. God's call on her life didn't suddenly arrive this morning with the mail. But on another level, it changes everything. Because today, the church stands up and says: "We see it too. We see what God has been doing in you and through you. And we want to bless it and name it, we want honor it and celebrate it."

Today, we will lay hands on Brittany and pray, joining our faith to God's call. We will anoint her, marking her for service in a long line of servants stretching back to the apostles and forward to saints we haven't met yet. We pause to bow before what the Holy Spirit has been doing behind the scenes, in retreats and conference rooms and church vans, in conversations with teenagers at 2am and prayers whispered over sleeping children.

But here's what I hope we remember: ordination isn't about elevation. It's about dedication. Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you" He didn't say "come sit on my throne." He invited you to share the servant work with him. The yoke is a tool for work, for pulling together, for shared burden.

Pastoral ministry is servant leadership, and the greatest pastors are the ones who never forget that they are servants first.

Brittany has already shown us what this looks like. She drove the miles, logged the hours, listened to hearts, celebrated victories, mourned the losses. She has taught children who will grow up and teach their own children. She has loved families through their messiest, most beautiful moments.

This is the yoke she has been pulling all along. Today, we simply bless the work and say: Keep going. We're with you. And so is God.

So here's my invitation to all of us gathered here today:

Look around.

Look at the people in this room. Some of them taught you what faith means. Some of them are teaching you right now, and you might not even realize it yet. And here's the truth you might not see you are teaching someone too. Your life, your faithfulness, your presence: it's shaping someone's understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

Remember your witnesses.

Not just the famous saints or the people with fancy titles. Remember the ordinary people whose extraordinary faithfulness showed you the way. The parent who prayed at the dinner table. The friend who showed up when things fell apart. The teacher who saw something in you that you couldn't see in yourself.

And Trust the promise.

You belong to God. You are named. You are claimed. And when you walk through the rivers and fires that are coming, and they are coming, you will never walk alone.

You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and you are part of that cloud for someone else.

Brittany, we thank God for you. For your gifts, your heart, your faithfulness. For the way you see people and call forth what God has planted in them. For thirteen years of teaching us what it means to follow Jesus with our whole lives.

Today, we pause. We bow. We celebrate what God has been doing all along. And we say with joy: Keep teaching. Keep loving. Keep showing us the way. We're with you, just as we know God is.

Thanks be to God. Amen.