For the Facing of This Hour
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Based on Hebrews 11-12:2. A Litany of Remembrance

The prayer is ascribed to the martyred Archbishop, Oscar Romero, although it was written by Ken Untener: *It helps, now and then,* the prayer begins, *to step back and take a long view. … We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. ... We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. ... We are prophets of a future not our own.*

Such a prayer would ring true for the author of our Lesson today. In the face of turmoil and trauma, our author presents a long view of biblical history in order to inspire a prophetic witness from the community in their own time and place. Just look at our foundation, our author proclaims. Surely, we can trust the God who has brought us *this far, by faith.* Surely we can keep going in our own anxious times.

Surely you and I can do the same, in our time of turmoil and trauma.

Our SPC Timeline provides us with a Letter to the Hebrews-like long view prayer that we, too, might accomplish in our own lifetime the fraction of God's work given to us for the facing of this hour.

Like Abraham and Moses, David and Samuel and the prophets, the elders of our timeline stepped out in faith, never quite sure how the vision would turn out, never quite seeing the fullness of the vision in their own time and place. Like the biblical ancestors of our Lesson some of our SPC elders got it really wrong. Our job now is to learn from them and correct course where necessary.

For millennia, our timeline tells us, this land and its people have gathered, responding to the yearning for oneness within us all.

The early 1700s brought religious refugees from Scotland and Ireland, leading to conflict with and eventual displacement of indigenous populations. The 1722 Treaty of Albany established the Blue Ridge Mountains as the dividing line between Virginia and Haudenosaunee lands. Still, settlers pushed across the Blue Ridge and into the Shenandoah Valley, encouraged by the colonial government of Virginia. By 1743 Scots Irish Presbyterians had chartered a worshiping community in the town known first as Mecklenburg. In 1744, the Haudenosaunee had little choice left. They sold their rights to the Shenandoah Valley.

By the early 1800s the Presbyterian Congregation had grown rapidly, including at least eleven African

American members, most likely enslaved. In 1838, the Session advocated repeal of the General Assembly anti-slavery position. In 1861 the congregation joined other pro-slavery congregations to become the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America.

In 1862, during the Battle of Antietam, the church building became a hospital for wounded confederate soldiers. An estimated 8000 soldiers were cared for in this sanctuary. In 1886, Fanny Bender, the last remaining African American member, was dismissed to the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The early 20th century offered relative stability, long pastorates, and collaborative relationships with other Presbyterian congregations in the region. In 1964, Mary Ellen Wright was born into the congregation. She is the oldest member who has been here her entire life! In 1976, Randy Tremba began a highly successful 42 year pastorate.

By 2000 the congregation had grown significantly. Rev. Patricia Donohoe was called as the first female Teaching Elder for the congregation. In 2001, SPC initiated a partnership with local Muslim communities and founded PEACEFEST, an annual community-wide event dedicated to interfaith dialogue and non-violence. Also in 2001, in opposition to the denominational guidance at the time, SPC ordained the first gay deacon in the presbytery. By 2010 SPC took the Earth Care Pledge. By 2014, SPC became a More Light Congregation. In 2017, the congregation began a journey to confront systemic racism, a journey that continues today.

In 2019, I became the first female lead pastor for the congregation. In 2020, during COVID, we began livestream worship. In 2021, we began using "hybrid" technology. In 2022, we led prayers for a family dedication ceremony at the site of Joe Burns' lynching in Berkeley County. In 2023 we launched our first Guns to Gardens safe surrender event. In 2025 we supported the first Pride Parade in town. In 2026 you supported my response to The Call for Clergy in Minneapolis, navigated a sabbatical, and committed to Becoming a Church That Reflects God's Heart.

By faith, we continue to carry the tradition into the future, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. In our time and place, Jesus shows us The Way of Radical Love in the face of cruel power. A *collective liberation*, we are learning to call this way of love, aligning with those who suffer most and insisting none of us are free until all of us are free.

Many of us are holding on to hope that some form of collective liberation will take hold this very week, Tuesday night to be exact, or perhaps the wee hours of Wednesday. I would be lying if I said I do not share some of that hope.

Our Lesson, however, would caution us again toward the long view. Indeed, my own translation of Hebrews 11 goes something like this: *Trust is the tangible evidence of hope, even when all evidence points to the contrary.*

An election, it turns out, is just a moment in time, as important as that moment may feel in its time. The Way of Jesus is eternal. Our trust must be in The Way of Jesus, a Way that guides us and strengthens us and sustains our hope no matter the outcome of this week's elections.

Nothing we do is complete, the prayer says, *which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.* The movement God began in our biblical ancestors and in our SPC elders continues through us, as we carry the tradition into the future. As we rip out the roots of injustice and water the seeds of righteousness. As we plant seeds that will one day grow, trusting the future promise to the master builder, proclaiming a prophetic vision of collective liberation that we may never see but that is most assuredly on its way.

We lay foundations that will need further development, the prayer continues. *We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.*

We are becoming a great cloud of witnesses for our descendants.