

# Access to the Cloud

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



*1 Kings 12:1-15; Luke 2:41-52*

Fifty three years ago at the height of the Cold War the world came, as far as we know, the closest it ever has to a nuclear war. History calls it the Cuban Missile Crisis when President John F. Kennedy and his administration learned in October 1962 that the Soviet Union was beginning to stage nuclear missiles on the island of Cuba, just ninety miles south of our fair state. This was an unacceptable development for the United States government and it placed President Kennedy in the unenviable position of having to decide among a list of very risky and potentially dangerous alternatives what would be the response to the Soviet's act of aggression. One false move could lead to another false move and before you could do anything about it, the world could – for all intents and purposes – be destroyed. To do this, to make this decision, the President gathered his most trusted advisers. Men (and they were all men) from the military, men from cabinet, men from the law – and for thirteen days these men became the President's council of advisers. And it is not an overstatement to say that the world and its future hung in the balance of the counsel these men were to give the young President. Our presence here this morning suggests that for the most part they gave him good advice.

I was four years old when all that was happening – when the President was assembling his trusted council – totally oblivious to the danger the world was in. Oblivious of course because my world was a bit smaller. The real politick of my life

had to do not with nuclear arms and blockades, but with negotiations around the most recent conflict with Randy, my friend across the alley, or how many vegetables I had to eat, or what time I had to go to bed. My world was pretty small. And yet at the same time it is when I was around that age that I began – like most of us -- to assemble my very own council of trusted advisors. This is what children do. From pretty early on, somewhat subconsciously, you and I have gathered in our minds the people we could look to for trusted advice. For many of us that instinctively became our parents – and then beyond that to perhaps a friend or two – or a sibling or two – or a teacher or two – or a person from our church or two. This rather informal group of folks who serve as our council of advisors.

Omar Bradley – the World War II U.S. General – in his biography tells of coming out of high school with no real direction. His plan was to work for the railroad awhile to save up money to go to college. His Sunday School teacher, a man he trusted and who had seen him grow up in the church, suggested he sit for the entrance exams for West Point. Bradley took his advice – the advice of his Sunday School teacher -- and the rest is history.

As children and as young adults and as older adults we are assembling, aren't we, this council of advisers that might help us to understand what direction to go. Never do we get them all in one room, but instead we hold a meeting somewhere up in our heads or down in our hearts. And when we find ourselves at some fork in the road or some Catch-22 we gather this group of advisers and wonder what might they say to us. And in some ways our little world hangs in the balance.

One could say that was true from the very beginning of this great story of God. The Bible tells

us that from the very start the world has hung in the balance of good and bad advice. Adam and Eve hear the counsel of God to enjoy the whole garden, but not to eat of the tree in the middle of the garden – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But then comes the serpent who slithers into the room and takes his place at the table and wonders if maybe the better option is to go ahead and give it a try. The world has hung in that balance.

So it is interesting to see that as Luke would tell us when the story of Jesus begins it begins when Jesus, the young man Jesus, decides to expand his council of advisers. He's done his best up in Nazareth with his mom and dad and brothers and sisters and maybe the local rabbi, but now that he's come to Jerusalem at the ripe old age of twelve he can't keep himself away from the temple council, the teachers of the law. Even when his family tries to head back home, young Jesus can't pull himself away from this expanded council of advisers. And as a result, Luke tells us, he increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.

So the story begins with the old Man Adam listening to the serpent but then it continues with the new Man Jesus listening to the elders of the Temple. And the world has hung in that balance.

And so it was for the people of Israel when the history of God's people shifts from the leadership of King Solomon to the leadership of his son King Rehoboam. And from the outset Rehoboam has a choice to make – does he continue in the oppressive ways of his father the King – or does he change course and become a more gracious and servant King like his grandfather David. What will be the trajectory of his administration? And so Rehoboam gathers not just one council of advisers, but two.

The first of the two are the elders – the council of those who have been around the block a time or two. And the second is the young bucks. The ones who think they know more than they really do. And from the elders the young King receives the guidance to instead of being a hard guy – to become a servant to the people. To exercise the power of grace and not the power of dominion. But from the young bucks the counsel is – turn up the heat.

Whip them with scorpions. Show them whose boss. And the young King weighs the advice and likely out of his own insecurity he listens to the wrong crowd – and the kingdom of Israel falls apart. The balance of the world tips in the wrong direction.

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We are so vulnerable, aren't we, to advice? Because you know along the way you and I have been collecting this council of advisers up in our head and down in our heart – those folks to whom we have given access to the deeper regions of our lives. And while we may be ten years or fifty years or seventy years beyond our youth – somehow our parents are still at the table? Or our first boss, or our last boss. Or our spouse or our older brother or younger sister? Or that wise college professor? Or that best friend or worst enemy? Somehow along the way we gather these advisers and they take their place at our table and so much of our journey and the journey we would yearn to share with our Creator and Savior – has a lot to do with who we are listening to. Who has our ear? And our little worlds hang in the balance.

And don't you wonder if that isn't part of the reason why the Church in its history has always had a time when we pause and remember the saints. All Saints Day. Surely it's a time when we fondly remember those who have preceded us in death. A time to give thanks for the lives of those who have fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith. But might it go deeper than that? Might it be that the Church pauses before the saints – because of all people we'd want at our table of advisers – it would be them? This too often silent majority. For it has been over 2000 years that the saints of the church have been roaming about – either in this world or the next. Add on a couple more thousand years of the Old Testament stories and we have this incredible cast of those who have been around the block a time or two – and are eager to find their place at our table. The writer to the Hebrews calls it – “the great cloud of witnesses ... since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” Can you imagine that? That long before the iCloud or the

Microsoft Cloud – there has been this great cloud of witnesses. It's what the whole story has been about. And not just in the pages of the Bible. But in the pages of our history – the great saints of the Church and the great saints of our lives. This great cloud that surrounds us with open access. It's so tempting, isn't it, to gather up the young bucks and to listen solely to the counsel of those within sight – the “small and arrogant oligarchy,” wrote G.K. Chesterton, “of those who happen to be walking around.” Oh but to think we could have at our table the saints? The patriarchs and matriarchs of the Old Testament? The apostles of the New Testament? The early church fathers? Augustine, Luther, Calvin? Mother Theresa, Simone Weil and Dorothy Day? Bonhoeffer, Barth and Lewis? Not to mention that person dear to your own soul – who enfleshed for you the way of Christ? Oh to think of these and so many others hovering about us in the great cloud of witnesses, yet whose books we have not read, whose lives we know little about, whose sacrifices remain hidden in unmarked tombs?

When you walk out this morning we are going to do as much as we can to make sure you walk out with our monthly Connect magazine – a great summary of our church's life in the next month. And when you open up to pages 10 through 13 you will find over 25 opportunities throughout the week when you can take your place among the saints. Bible Studies, small groups, classes on the spiritual life. We have one of the most knowledgeable Bible teachers in Sarasota – Dale Vollrath -- who teaches twice a week. Seminary trained pastors and lay people throughout the week introducing us to the great saints of the faith – inviting us to walk amidst the great cloud of witnesses.

I thought of this Saturday a week ago when

we were doing our Trunk or Treat. Children and families invited to dress up in their costumes and stroll through the village of Biblical characters that we had out in our parking lot. And they came dressed in their best – Spidermen and Minions, Power Rangers and Pirates, Elsa's and Olaf's – walking amidst the cloud of witnesses. Moses and Sarah and Joseph and Mary and Noah and Jonah and shepherds and angels. Each telling their stories. Witnessing to the goodness of God in a scary world of goblins and ghosts. The great cloud of witnesses.

And so we too arrive from the scary world onto this campus – dressed in our Sunday best or our flip flops and tee shirts – we arrive greeted by the great Oak and the waving palms. Oh, but so much more – the communion of the saints. The multitude which no one can number. Whose hope was in the Word made flesh – and who worship with us but upon another shore and in a greater light. The great cloud of witnesses. And who would know more than they that balance by which our lives are held? The good counsel, the bad counsel. And who would want more than they – for us to choose the right fork in the road? That one day we may join them upon that other shore and in that greater light and that it would be said of us – that we too have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.



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Church of the Palms

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