

Cloud of Witnesses

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18
Ephesians 1:11-23
November 3, 2013: All Saints
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I. Introduction

Today we celebrate All Saints Sunday. Today, we remember all of those who have died in the faith and particularly those in our family who have died in the last year. We celebrate their lives. We honor their memories and we look at the ways in which God worked through them as they helped to shape us and shape the world.

This is the 20th anniversary of my Mom's death and also coincidentally, the year in which I turn 52 which was the age that she was when she died. So, I've been doing a lot of reflecting on my Mom this year. She was, as some of you know, an oncology nurse, so she spent a lot of her career working with people who are dying. And she also had done a lot of spiritual direction with the Shalem Institute which is one of our partners here at Metropolitan.

And to this day, 20 years later, people still come up to me at points and say, "Your mother was a saint." And that's sort of weighty language, that word "saint" is sort of fraught and is a wonderful gift and celebration and honor of the work that she did.

II. What Makes a Saint?

But it's worth unpacking that term a little bit because it's sort of loaded. When people talk about saints, we often conjure up in our heads images of people who are

very holy, who are often very different from how we perceive ourselves in our brokenness. We picture saints as St. Francis as gentle, as kind and a little bit unworldly.

That's not, of course, how the word "saint" is used in the scripture and particularly in Paul's writings in his letter to the Ephesians where you see a very different idea of what it means to be a saint. Paul refers to all the people that he was writing as saints. He refers to the saints at Corinth, to the saints in Ephesus and he doesn't mean there that these are holy people, people who doing everything right. He knows full well that he's writing to people who need his advice and guidance, to people who are often lost and confused about where God is calling them and who God is calling them to be. He is often writing to people that he has occasion to criticize very pointedly for the immorality of their lives. And yet, he calls all of them saints.

You see this sense also when you look at the broad sweep of our scriptural story and the people that God calls to serve as God's instruments and all of them are broken in some important way. From Abraham who is so distrustful of God's providence that every time he felt threatened, he would offer up his wife Sarah as his sister rather than claim her as his own wife, to Jacob who is a thief and a trickster, to Moses who is a murderer and unwilling to follow God's call, to King David who is an adulterer and a murderer, to Peter who had his anger and impulse control issues, all of these people that God has chosen to do God's will are all in their own ways deeply flawed and broken, and yet God uses all of that to bring about God's will for the world.

People like those great saints of the scriptures, like these saints whose names we will celebrate today, remind us that they are not saints because they had lived godly lives. They are saints because they have lived lives that were claimed by God. We do not become saints by virtue of our holy living. We become saints because God chooses to use us, all of us, our gifts and our graces and our brokenness and our frailties as instruments to bring about God's will.

III. A Broader Perspective

So, why do we have a day to celebrate all of these imperfect people, claimed by God in spite of their imperfections? Well, first to say thank you to them. To thank God for them and for all of the ways that the saints who have gone before us have shaped who we are, have shaped who our church is. Who have shaped what the world has become by virtue of being instruments of God.

We also take this moment to acknowledge that because they, like we, are frail and broken, we have an opportunity as we gather and recollect them to offer them our forgiveness and ask their forgiveness for the places that we have been involved in that brokenness. A lot of people never have a chance to work through their brokenness with a family member or a loved one or a friend and All Saints is a time when we can gather, when we can say "thank you," when we can say "I'm sorry," when we can say "I forgive you" and I want to invite you to take advantage of these moments today.

All Saints is not about just celebrating people who got it all right nor is it about whitewashing people who tripped and stumbled periodically. It's about acknowledging

that that is the story that of all of us are in and celebrating God's faithfulness in using them and using us to fulfill God's work in the world.

Paul tells us that not because of our work, but because of God's claim on us that we have obtained an inheritance and then sealed with the Holy Spirit and in that way, we have all become saints. If God has been faithful in acting through the lives of people like Moses and David and Peter, God can be trusted to be faithful in acting through our lives as well.

Part of the purpose of All Saints is to step back a little bit from the daily-ness of our lives and look at the great sweep of God's salvation history. And part of the reason this passage from Daniel is included in our lectionary reading's for All Saints Sunday is because Daniel gives us his wonderful sweep of the rise and fall of empires. And in the midst of that, as we seek to open ourselves to the divine presence, we look at how God's saints have shaped that history and continued to work for the kingdom that God has promised us.

This passage from Daniel happened at sort of a hinge point in the book. Up until this point we've been hearing the stories of Daniel and then the rest of the book is all of these apocalyptic prophecies about the end of the world. And these four beasts that you heard about are in all likelihood representing the kingdoms of Babylon and the Persians and the Greeks and the Romans. And Daniel's point is, in the midst of all that turbulence and in the midst of a world of empire after empire grasping after power and control and seeking to impose its will on the world, the saints of God continue to march along building the kingdom that God will bring to fruition at the end of time.

IV. Conclusion

Our family had a chance to visit Coventry Cathedral this summer. Coventry was a cathedral that was built in the 13th century but then was destroyed in the German air raids during World War II. And the British people built a new, very modern sanctuary adjacent to the shell of the original cathedral and the back of the sanctuary, if you could kind of picture the entire back wall of our church, is all glass and looks out onto the remnants of the cathedral that is left standing. And in that glass are etched all of the great saints of scripture in our church and they're etched in this glass. So, you can't just sort of catch a glimpse of them until you get right up close and see that they're all sort of edgy characters, they're all people who had their own struggles and wrestling. And there's this wonderful sense of being surrounded by all of these folks who have been there before us, who have experienced the same kind struggles that we have experienced and through whom God was working.

All Saints is an opportunity to take this broad perspective of God's salvation history to look at how God has moved through time in places where it was not obvious God was moving. But now, as we look back, we can see the movement of the Holy Spirit. It's a time to celebrate those saints who with all their gifts and all their brokenness brought their lives to the service of God for the transformation of the world. To celebrate those lives claimed by God and to learn that to trust that God has claimed each of us in just the same way. To bring all of whom we are, our gifts, our joys, our brokenness, and our frailties into the light of the divine presence. Trusting that through all of whom we are God is seeking to transform the world. Amen.