

Crossing Over

Joshua 3:7-17

Crossroads Christian Church

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Nov. 2, 2014 Pentecost 21A

All Saints

Earlier in the service, we sang "For All the Saints," and shortly thereafter honored those who we have loved who passed away in the last twelve months. I want to share with you a true story that happened about this time of year way back in 1968, when Sandy and I were attending Christian Theological Seminary, a few months after we were married.

Dr. Frank Albert was one of our favorite professors. He took what could be a very dry subject, historical theology, and made it live. He came from a Greek Orthodox background, so he taught us to appreciate that heritage. He told us of the various saints and doctors of the early church. More important than what he taught was who he was. He was a genuine, caring, compassionate committed Christian, the kind of person through whom you could see Jesus—and that's what a saint is. Anyway, Dr. Albert also pastored a small church in a nearby community. On a Fall day, he was in a courtroom, speaking up for a teenager who had gotten into trouble. His heart stopped beating. As a seminary community, we felt something of the grief that the Cardinals baseball community is feeling on the death of Oscar Taveras. We gathered for a memorial service in the seminary chapel. The opening hymn was the song we sung earlier today, "For All the Saints." The organ boomed out, and over a hundred voices boomed out to celebrate God's triumph over death, and God's welcoming of the saints. It was a chilling and overpowering moment as we sang Dr. Albert to heaven. I never sing the song without remembering him. And as I sing, I remember other saints I have known who have joined Dr. Albert there. "From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Alleluia, Alleluia."ⁱ

In other hymns that talk about our journey from death into eternal life with God, we hear the image of crossing the

Jordan. In "He Leadeth Me," we sing, "When my task on earth is done, when by thy grace the victory's won, e'en death's cold wave I will not flee, since God through Jordan leadeth me."ⁱⁱⁱ

That phrase, "since God through Jordan leadeth me," is borrowed from the re-entry that Joshua and the Twelve Tribes of Israel were experiencing in today's scripture reading from Joshua. They were coming home to a place that none of them had ever been before; they were re-entering a land that they had never entered in the first place.

They were receiving a land promised by God. It was a land that none of them, except for Joshua and Caleb and a few others as spies, had never seen before. As a matter of fact, according to the story, this whole generation had seen nothing but desert and oasis, because they were the children of the generation that had left Egypt through the divided Red Sea. And for a long time before that, their ancestors had been slaves in Egypt. Their ancestors had come to Egypt as guests, in the time of Joseph, to escape famine; and since Joseph was second in command only to Pharaoh, they prospered and multiplied. But eventually there arose "a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph" and their lives became ones of wretched existence of forced labor and humiliation.

So why were they going home to a place they had never been before? The Hebrews weren't just a collection of individuals; they were a community, and they had a communal memory. They were the children of Joseph, and they were going back to the land where Joseph had lived before he had been sold into slavery. They were going home to a land promised to Abraham and Sarah when they left Babylonia; it was the land of Isaac and Rebekah; of Jacob and Rachel. It was home; it was part of their DNA.

Today when Jewish people celebrate the Passover, they don't say "When our ancestors were in Egypt..." they say, "When we were in Egypt." And they finish with the toast, "Next year in Jerusalem." So you can see why the Hebrews under the leadership of Joshua, tempered and tested by

decades of wilderness wandering, were ready to go home, ready to re-enter the land that none of them had ever seen.

At last, the people were gathered near the banks of the Jordan River. If you're trying to picture it, remember that the Jordan isn't a long river; it isn't a wide river. It's more like the Meramec than the Mississippi. It flows through a desert, in one of the lowest spots on the face of the earth, bringing water from the mountains of Syria and the Sea of Galilee down to the Dead Sea. The people gathered on its banks had with them all their belongings; their tents, their clothes, their food, their food animals, their pack animals. They also had the bones of Joseph, so they could take them to the burial spot of his ancestors. They also had the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was a great and powerful symbol of God's Presence. It was like a portable throne for the Invisible God. It was said to have contained a jar of manna to remind them that God had fed them in their wilderness journeys. It contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the rules of the God that they had covenanted to follow.

The people were given three days to prepare spiritually and physically for the crossing. "Sanctify yourselves," Joshua said, "for tomorrow the Lord will *do wonders* among you." You can sense the building anticipation. God gave Joshua final instructions, and then Joshua said to the people, "Draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God. By this you shall know that among you is the living God, who without fail will drive out" the people occupying the land. "The ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one for each tribe. When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off."

So the people watched as the priests stepped into the river, and the river dried up as they crossed. The people crossed, and they remembered the stories told them by their parents, of how God had divided the Red Sea as they

escaped Egypt. Do you see the balance, the parallel, how the exit from Egypt and the entrance into the Promised Land were so similar?

The story goes on in chapter 4 to tell how these representatives of the twelve tribes picked up stones from the bottom of the riverbed, and how they made a pile of the stones at Gilgal as a reminder of the day they crossed the Jordan, going back home to a place they'd never been before. Later, there's will be a lot not to like in the book of Joshua, stories of holy wars and bloodlettings, but we can learn here something of what it means to trust in the absolute faithfulness of God; a God who promises and delivers; a God who brings God's people home.

St. Paul, in an age when travel was slow and arduous, was constantly on the move, entering and re-entering churches, starting new churches, writing letters, and visiting the churches already established. The words that we heard earlier from 1 Thessalonians, describe an attitude toward ministry that is beautiful, and one that I hope I can take as my own. While he could have claimed his authority as an apostle, he took a more sensitive route. "But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

On this All Saint's Day, we cherish the stories of saints who throughout the history of the church have kept faith sweet and strong. We recall the apostles and martyrs of the early church; we remember the bold visions of saints like Augustine; the gentle and beautiful kindness of St. Francis. We remember the missionaries who spread the faith into different parts of the world. But we also remember those who the church didn't canonize, but who are saints for us.

We remember parents and grandparents, teachers and preachers who helped us find the way to Christ, who lovingly gave themselves in Christian service, who have returned home. And we also remember that we are called to be

saints; not spiritual super athletes, but faithful believers holding fast to Christ, knowing that Christ is holding fast to us, until the day when we cross over. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

To St. Paul, saints are not just great spiritual athletes or conquerors, but also include the ordinary day-to-day believers who live in a specific place and time, and who try to be set apart as God's people. That doesn't mean withdrawing from the world, but rather carrying God's love and healing into the world. With that in mind, we come in prayer to celebrate the saints who have gone before us.

(hymn, silence)

Let us remember those who have returned to their Lord in the past 12 months; who have heard their Lord say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Names, chime after each. Offering names from congregation.

For all the Saints who have gone before us,

God, we give thanks for our ancestors in the faith.

For all the Saints who have been beloved to us,

God, we give thanks for our loved ones who have passed on.

For all the Saints who have left us too soon,

God, we mourn their passing, and they remain in our hearts.

For all the Saints who have exemplified the faithful life,

God, may we learn from their ways and follow You.

On this day, we name all those who are in our hearts:

[speak aloud the names of the saints in our hearts]

For all the Saints, God, we give thanks to You;

On earth, in heaven, we are one, we are Your children.

We thank You for those who have gone before us.

May we forgive those for whom we did not have an opportunity to forgive.

May we know that we are forgiven for our own sins.

May we know that we are loved by the same God, from this life into eternity.

In the name of Jesus the Christ, who lived, who died, and who lives eternally.

Amen and Amen.

Communion: In the classic 1984 movie, *Places in the Heart*, Sally Fields plays a widowed Christian woman trying to raise her family in a small Texas town. The last scene of the movie is set in a church, during the communion service. The elements are blessed and distributed in trays, like we do here. You're not surprised to see the members of Sally's family receiving the elements, but as the trays go down the pews, you see a man who was lynched; relatives who had died; a law officer who was killed in the line of duty. Each one receives the elements, partakes, and passes them on. This is a visual portrayal of the Communion of the Saints. We partake together, sure. But we also partake with the saints who have made this church what it is, and have passed on; and with other believers and teachers and missionaries and witnesses and prophets, going clear back to the Upper Room. Let us receive these elements as part of that community of faith that extends through time. Amen.

ⁱ "For All the Saints" by William W. How, Chalice Hymnal, Chalice Press, ST Louis MO, p. 637.

ⁱⁱ "He Leadeth Me" by Joseph Gilmore, Chalice Hymnal, p.545