

“Built Upon the Bones”

We live in an age that enjoys thinking of itself as the summit of human development, the beneficiary of progress. As Christians, we, too, celebrate human progress, but we do so in the context of a church that thinks with the saints. In our struggles to be faithful to Christ, we are not left to ourselves or to our age. We have the examples, the models, the doctrine, and the thoughts of those who have walked the path of faith before us; we have the saints of old; we have the early church fathers and mothers; we have, down through the centuries, men and woman who sacrificed their lives, and wrote their witness in blood.

Today’s three lessons were taken from the November 1, All Saint’s Day lectionary readings. Together they share a common origin: they are part of the church’s Scripture; they are gifts from our tradition. We sometimes forget how strange it is, in a culture that worships newness and change ... this year’s “new and improved model” ... how strange it is to gather and submit to a tradition. But I believe is very important for us as believers and as a church to think with the saints of old, submitting ourselves to their guidance and gifts, as we make our way in the world.

When today’s passage from Revelation speaks of “a new heaven and a new earth”, it does so with images drawn from the hopes and expectations of Israel. Our newness always stands on the shoulders of the past. Our hopes for the future are all based on the promises of God to those who came before us. Listening to the “All Saints’ Day scripture readings” is a good opportunity for remembrance ... not only remembrance of the saints of the past, but also for remembrance of the gift of church’s tradition. Far too often individual believers or individual churches along with their clergy forget their past; forget that they are inheritors of valued traditions ... inheritors of a gospel ministry and mission that were established over time by men and woman who gave generously, sacrificially, of their time, talent, and money to establish a witness that has stood the test of time.

This point was driven home to me by Earle Vail, who was the clerk of the Session for twenty some years. Within the first several months when I arrived here as a young pastor in 1969, Earle suggested that I read all the Session minutes since May 16, 1876. And if I had any questions, he would fill in that which was not written down. Such a task was invaluable to me in preparation for serving as pastor of this church and within this community. By reading 93 years of minutes, I gained a sense of how the church came into being; I gained an appreciation of its history and the life of the church in the context of the Boyds community. I experienced the church’s struggles ... its conflicts ... its defeats ... its victories ... I came to know its people ... particularly its “saints of old” whose names on the sanctuary windows surround us each Sunday.

John, the writer of Revelation, is exiled to the island of Patmos, which could very well have been an extension of the persecution under Domitian at the end of the first century A.D. John’s vision, in the spirit of Isaiah, contains a new heaven and a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. With Rome on a rampage and Jerusalem destroyed in 70 A.D., John provides us with a cosmic glimpse to put everything in perspective. Rome may have its hour on the stage, but, as Mac Beth observed upon the death of his wife, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.” When Rome is gone, God will still be! For God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Everything else is “in between stuff.” Not that the “in between stuff” is unimportant; it’s just that it does not have *ultimate* importance. What God is doing and decides to do ... is what is important.

John sees a new heaven and earth replacing the old, fallen, corrupt world ruled by Caesar and his arrogant demand that he be worshipped as a god. It is God, not Caesar who is in control of the universe. John declares chaos vanquished, replaced by the order of God. Heaven is described as a new Jerusalem, as splendid as a radiant bride coming to meet her husband. During John’s time, when Domitian was persecuting Christians, God must have seemed very distant from the Church. Thus John wants to assure them that a new day was about to appear. Now we might weep for our loved ones killed or injured in the persecution, John tells his readers, but soon “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more”

It is to the power and love of the Alpha and the Omega to which the saints of every age have borne witness. The saints and martyrs are mentioned several times in Revelation as they dwell before God’s throne, safe now from all enemies and continually singing their beautiful choruses of praise for the Lamb. We, too, are a part of this communion of saints by virtue of our baptism. We are commissioned at baptism to add our witness, to affirm that our fate is in the hands of the One victorious over sin and death. For the Christ, or as John likes to call him, the Lamb, has given his life for us on the Cross. Jesus Christ stands before his followers and declares that he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of all things. There is no longer anything to fear, because God is beyond the constraints of the physical universe and time itself. God stands before us and with us, but beyond time and space.

I know this illustration will date me, however, I think it is a perfect interpretation of John’s vision. In the play and movie *Westside Story*, Tony and Maria sing a haunting duet “Somewhere There’s a Place for Us” in which they long for a better world. They are in love, but they are from different, warring sections of society --- Maria is Puerto Rican and Tony is Italian. Never the twain should meet could be the motto of the two sides. Thus they must keep their romance a secret. This cannot be done for long,

and feelings of the two sides heat up so that a “rumble” takes place in which Tony in the heat of passion kills Maria’s brother. Tony is then hunted and knifed by the Puerto Ricans, and even though he has killed her brother, Maria still loves him and cradles his dying form in her arms as they sing about a world in which people will not live in hatred and suspicion ... a world in which there will be a place for them and their love. Their vision is not unlike that of John’s, who also saw a world in which tears no longer existed because the things that caused them had been destroyed by the Lamb upon the throne.

The vision of God wiping away every human tear is lovely, but we should also consider the role of God in those times when there is no need for tears, keeping it in perspective. I remember a story from history that underlines this point. Dr. John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian clergy and the only clergy to sign the Declaration of Independence, offers us insight into the matter of God’s providence and care. A neighbor of Dr. Witherspoon burst into his study one day and excitedly said, “You must join me in giving thanks to God for his providence in saving my life. As I was driving, the horse ran away and the buggy was smashed to pieces on the rocks and I escaped unharmed.” Dr. Witherspoon replied, “Why, I can tell you a far more remarkable providence than that. I have driven over that road hundreds of times. My horse never ran away, my buggy never was smashed, and I was never hurt. God’s providence has been for me even more remarkable than it has been for you.”

I began today’s message stating we live in a world that is guilty of a kind of intentional amnesia ... that self-centeredness and arrogance has lead us to believe we stand at the summit of human development ... that we know more than any generation ever before us. This is an odd thought when you consider that in most important fields, like jazz for instance, the field only moves forward by the immersion in a tradition. “Thorough immersion and tradition is the only source of true originality.” One author writes that most education is history. Most professors are historians, no matter what their field is, passing on to the next generation what previous generations figured out. The only way for one generation to make advances is for it to thoroughly instill what past generations have known. In other words, all thinking is a kind of apprenticeship, submitting yourself to the disciple of another’s thought before you have interesting thoughts of your own.

This is an important learning when regarding the stewardship of the Church. As Christians, we have inherited the responsibility of handing down to the next generation, be they our children or grandchildren, the very tenets of faith. This is why Christian education, worship, fellowship, and service are paramount to any church. These activities of the faith do not happen on their own. I liken it to one of my favorite track and field events: the four-by-100 meter relay. It is a team event. You can have the four fastest sprinters and still lose the race if you don’t have everyone’s full cooperation in the passing of the baton.

This is especially true when you consider everyone in your life who contributed their influence (witness) to your Christian faith. Certain people in our life history passed the baton of belief. Perhaps they may have been a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a friend, a certain writer, a member of the clergy, even a stranger. In fact, countless Christians --- our spiritual forebears from the time of Jesus until today --- are to be thanked. You are a Christian ... I am a Christian because of their faithfulness. They ran the race and passed the baton. Jesus gave this mission of baton-passing to his disciples; they turned it over to the people and generations who followed them; and because of their faithfulness, we are Christians today.

For myself, it is easy to think of several people who passed the baton to me ... various Sunday School teachers, ministers, teachers, seminary professors, and friends ... people who along the way witnessed their faith in a loving way and believed in me enough that I was able to continue to pursue the things which make for faith. I suspect that each of you can, as well, think of those people who greatly influenced your belief in God and in Jesus Christ.

If you have ever visited the Vietnam Memorial, you know that it has a stunning effect. The most memorable impression comes not from statues or images of Vietnam warriors; the most memorable effects are those rows and rows of names. So many names! And there is an additional effect. As you stand at the wall, looking at the names, suddenly you realize that you see your own face reflected in the polished black granite. You stand there, looking at yourself, your own reflection, your own face, with all the names of the dead.

In a way, this is what All Saints Day means. We remember the saints, all of them, not just the more notable martyrs, but our Sunday school teachers, the preachers, all those who have preceded us in this church and in the faith. And yet, as we remember their names, we see ourselves reflected in them. We join the procession down through the ages. We take our place along with them. We focus on the saints and we see our own contemporary faces reflected in their names.

Now it is our time! Now it is our day to be sure that the baton is passed to the next generation. For 130 years God has seen fit to have His Word preached and lived within this community of faith. As a church, what we have today has been passed on to us. We have been gifted with a long history and rich tradition. We are stewards of this tradition. We have received much and we have much to give back. There is always a need to give thanks. First and foremost, we need to thank God, as well as acknowledge the trust that past generations have placed in us. We do that when we give totally of ourselves to what we believe ... to what we know to be true. Amen.