

Hearts are Brave Again!
Joshua 3: 7-17; Matthew | Mateo 5: 1-12
Rev. Mary Elizabeth Hanchey
November 1, 2020 | 1 de Noviembre 2020

Have you ever cried, totally unexpectedly, at something beautiful?

Maybe you are not a crier, but you still remember that moment when you were awestruck by an unexpected vista, or the face of an old friend, or the smell of a beloved family dish, or artwork that pierced your generally sensible countenance and grabbed hold of your spirit, or stumbling upon a particularly thin place in the universe?

One such moment for me was on a cool and rainy All Saints Sunday nearly a decade ago - but the memory of that moment is so fierce that I can feel it today just as I did then.

I was tired from weathering yet another surgery with our fragile infant. I was serving as an interim children's minister at a large, gothic, Episcopal church in downtown Raleigh. The sanctuary was dark and cavernous. The organ was bold. The pageantry was beautiful. And all of a sudden, as voices filled the space with a boisterous singing of For All the Saints, I spotted the white dove kite soaring above the heads of the congregation. It was being flown by a serious young acolyte who had finally inherited this important job. And as the white dove bobbed and climbed above the heads of all of those gathered, I cried. It was one of those cries where you imagine that you might just dab your eyes a bit but then your whole face gets twisted in an effort to stifle sobs and then you are simply done with any such imagining that you are going to remain composed and you give in and cry a good cry. It happens to me sometimes.

But the dove was just the thing that pushed me over the edge. Because it was undergirded by the words to a hymn that so many congregations sing in observance of All Saints Sunday. One whose words ring with remembrances of God's deep and abiding love.

I'm not sure what version of the hymn I sniffled through that day, but let's look at the one we sang today. What is its theological arc? What story does it tell? On this day when we stop to remember those who have died before us, and to wrestle with our own mortality and humanity in the midst of this broken world, what do we claim?

First of all let's make some claims on the word "saints." It can be moving to use "saint" to describe someone who has died whom we loved deeply. It might feel more complicated to use that word to describe someone with whom we had a problematic relationship.

And we also hold in our hearts so many needless, and often violent deaths. I don't want "from their labors rest" to seem like a trite euphemism for - died violently because of white supremacy, or suffered needlessly from COVID, died of something curable because they couldn't get healthcare, died at the hands of their abuser because there was no protection to be found.

All Saints Sunday causes us - causes me - to wrestle with making space to remember with fondness and light those who died after long and meaningful lives, while also holding space to be angry about deaths that should not have happened when they did.

None of us can fully describe the way that God redeems us in our brokenness, or what it really means to use the word “saint,” but I think that we use it here out of a generous, inclusive, and gracious posture. It’s a congregationalist and populist move, really. Though we may be able to make claims that are even bigger and more expansive than the ones we find here, this text gives us the language to honor all - ALL - who have claimed their place in the body of Christ - all who follow Jesus. There is no other litmus test.

Today we sang 5 verses.

Verse 1 describes the saints who have died and are no longer here, on this earth.

Verse 2 names Jesus as their comfort and strength.

Verses 3 hopes that followers of Jesus will continue to be bold.

Verse 4 promises that even as we struggle on this side of heaven we are bound up together in Jesus’ love with those who have gone before.

And verse 5 is a rallying cry for the work of living on this earth.

That’s the general arc - people have come before us who now rest from their earthly work, Jesus was their comfort, we should boldly follow Jesus, we are bound up with those who have died through Jesus, we can live with brave hearts and strong faith.

But in this grueling and terrifying moment in our history together as Christians living in the United States - some of the words are particularly poignant. My two favorite verses are the second and the last.

This is the second verse. “You were their rock, their refuge, and their might; you, Christ the hope that put their fears to flight - and gloom and doubt, you were their one true Light, Alleluia. Alleluia.”

We can reflect on many dark times in the lives of those who have died, and in the history of our country and our world - and wonder what it meant for Christ to be a rock and refuge. And we make this claim our own: Christ is our hope and rock and refuge. Our hope in Christ does not absolve us of striving. We labor. We labor as those who have gone before us have labored. But there is hope and refuge in something outside of us; in the mystery of Jesus whose light even the darkness cannot overcome.

Can we cling to this? What does it mean to cling to this? To make this claim?

This is the final verse. “And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, then hearts are brave again, and faith grows strong, Alleluia! Alleluia!”

Well thank God for this. Because the strife is fierce. The warfare is long. And I am straining, straining my ears for that distant triumph song. Can you hear it? I am not sure that I can. But oh that promise that hearts can be brave and faith can grow strong. That in the midst of strife hearts can be brave again.

But what does it mean for our hearts to be brave again? For our faith to grow strong? What will that mean for you? For me? For us as church family?

Family of God, in recent months we studied the story of the Exodus and we followed Moses through the desert. Both the Old Testament and New Testament stories today invoke Moses.

Our Old Testament story for today came from Joshua. And in that story, God tells Joshua - I will show that I am with you as I am with Moses. Carry me into the waters of the Jordan, they will dry up and make a path. There will be a path through the deep waters in the middle of the Jordan, even though it is overflowing its banks. Now you might remember that the people Israel had built the ark of the covenant to carry God with them. And when this ark was carried into the Jordan, the waters made a mighty wall and stopped their flowing, and the people passed through.

How might we carry God with us into the deep waters?

We are still reading the gospel of Matthew as we have been for all of the green and growing season - the time between Pentecost and the Reign of Christ Sunday. And in this story Jesus says - the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do whatever they teach you - but do not do as they do - because they do not practice what they teach. Jesus is saying that the Pharisees succeed Moses as authoritative teachers - but that they are bad actors. Specifically Jesus says "they tie up heavy burdens hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them."

They do not labor for God. They create labor for others. They put burdens on others but do not lift them.

Jesus teaches: "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

On this Sunday when we sing of resting from the labors of this world, we are prompted to remember that following Jesus is labor-intensive.

Following Jesus is work. God goes with us as we trudge into deep waters.

Our hearts can be brave again.

We are bound up by the love of Jesus to those who no longer live in these broken bodies in this broken world.

In fact we are ringed by this cloud of witnesses divine. Can you hear them? We are ringed by this cloud of witnesses divine. Have they changed us? We are ringed by this cloud of witnesses divine. What have they left for us? We are ringed by this cloud of witnesses divine. What is our labor, now?

Family of God, hear this promise: the distant triumph song can make your heart brave. See if you can hear it.

Alleluia. Alleluia.