

“Origins”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time/All Saints Day
November 3, 2019

First Scripture Lesson: Deuteronomy 6:20-25

²⁰When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?” ²¹then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²²The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. ²³He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. ²⁴Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. ²⁵If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.”

Second Scripture Lesson: Hebrews 11:32-12:3

^{11:32}And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

^{12:1}Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart



Sermon: *Origins*

On Wednesday night of this week, the Washington Nationals won the World Series. When the team returned to Washington for a parade in their honor yesterday,¹ the fans cheering from the sidewalks and dancing in the streets owed a tremendous debt of gratitude to another community 600 miles away. You see, the Washington Nationals team that won it all this week, began life north of the border, in Canada.

From their founding as an expansion team in 1969 until 2004, the team we now know as the Nationals were called the Expos and played their home games in Olympic Stadium in the heart of downtown Montreal. For 35 years, fans there built a following, cheering on their “Spos” through good years and bad. But their history goes back even further. The reason Montreal got an expansion team in 1969, was because the Montreal fans had supported professional baseball for over half a century when Montreal was home to a thriving minor league team. Before he broke the MLB color barrier in 1947, Jackie Robinson played for the Dodgers’ minor league team in Montreal.² The history of baseball in Montreal includes legends like Roy Campanella, Duke Snider, and Don Drysdale.³ So, if it weren’t for the fervent and long-suffering support and nurture of fans in Montreal, there would have been no franchise to move to Washington and the baseball fans in our nation’s capital today would have nothing to celebrate.

Every successful story has a back story. In the comics and movie world, these are called “origin stories.” Spiderman was a high school student who was bitten by a radio-active spider.⁴ Hulk was a mild-manner scientist until he got an overwhelming dose of gamma radiation that turned him into a giant green rage machine.⁵

For every person or enterprise that has experienced success, there are people and events in their past that helped to make them who they are and who have contributed to that success. Apple began as a small business in Steve Job's parents' garage.⁶ Actor Ashton Kutcher was an engineering student at the University of Iowa when a talent scout invited him to enter a modeling competition.⁷ Harrison Ford was a carpenter who by chance, was hired to build cabinets for some guy named George Lucas.⁸ Everyone and everything has an origin story, including you. Who you are today is rooted in the lessons and influence of people who have come before you: your ancestors, grandparents, parents, coaches, teachers, friends. Who we are and what we are is very much a product of the people who have come before us. And that fact is no less true for the church. It's what we celebrate when we observe All Saints Day.

First a quick lesson on All Saints: In the beginning, the church honored martyrs of the faith by setting aside a different feast day for each one. But eventually there became so many martyrs, all their celebrations were consolidated into one: All Saints Day. Now, some traditions venerate those saints and make miraculous claims about them and sometimes, treat them as intercessors with God. But in the reformed tradition, of which Presbyterians are a part, when we talk about "the saints," we mean something very different. In our tradition *all* believers are saints; not because we are so good, but because we have been *sanctified* by God; which is a five-dollar word that means we who are sinners have been made *holy* by God.

In his New Testament writings, the Apostle Paul repeatedly makes reference to "the saints." But Paul doesn't believe "the saints" are somehow superior in their behavior. Paul believes that Christians have been *sanctified*, made holy by God. When he writes First Corinthians, he addresses it "To the Saints..." But he is writing not to just a select group, but to the whole congregation which is made up of regular people, sinners one and all; people who have been made holy through Christ Jesus.⁹ Through our baptisms we are marked as God's own and we too are sanctified; we are made holy; we are washed and made new for service to God.¹⁰ For Paul, members of the church are called "saints," not because of what they have accomplished, but because of who they are in Christ.

And so, in our reformed Presbyterian tradition, we don't set individuals apart as being more worthy of praise for things they have done. We don't venerate individuals. But we do honor and give thanks to God for all of those who have gone before us, who helped to make the church what it is, and who helped to form and shape us into the people that we are today.

Just like fans of the Nationals owe a debt of gratitude to the people of Montreal and just like users of Apple products owe a debt to Steve Job's parents, we owe a debt of gratitude to all those faithful people who came before us; those who began this church, who faithfully served God in big and small ways here, and who for over a century, nurtured this congregation in which you and I grow and are spiritually fed today. There have been hundreds, thousands of people who have called this church home. Many of them cast long shadows and are remembered today. Dr. Ray Dronesfeld was pastor here for almost 30 years. This building in which you are worshipping today is part of his legacy. Mr. John Beltz donated the land for the Overbrook retreat center that bears his name. But for every name you know, there are hundreds you probably don't.

In January 1915, 39 intrepid souls set forth on a journey to found this little church in the heart of Clintonville. Harry Barr was their first pastor¹¹ and six months after the church was founded, George and Edna Moore became the first parents to bring their infant child to receive the sacrament of baptism. His name was David Wilson Moore.¹²

There was Sadie Legg and Edith Butterworth and Elnathan Pettit. Pettit was one of those original founding members. In 1920 when the presbytery submitted an overture to the churches that would allow women to be elected as Deacons and Elders, everyone on the session of Overbrook Church voted "no" except one person: Elnathan Pettit.¹³ Then in 1926, just 6 years later, Ms. Sadie Legg became the first woman to serve in elected office at Overbrook when she was elected to the Board of Deacons.¹⁴ And in 1940, Edith Butterworth broke through the glass ceiling when she became the first woman to serve on Overbrook's Board of Trustees. The person who nominated her for that position: Elnathan Pettit.¹⁵ Florence Wild then became the first woman to be ordained as an elder at Overbrook church in 1962.¹⁶

Mary McQuinniff was a long-time member who collected tax stamps to raise money for the church. For the uninitiated, tax stamps were "receipts merchants were required to buy from the state and give to consumers when merchants charged them state sales tax. Consumers were encouraged to collect the receipts and give them to schools or charities. These organizations could then turn them in to the state and collect three per cent of the face value."¹⁷ When the church was

trying to raise money to build the sanctuary (in which you are now sitting), Ms. McQuinniff collected bags and boxes of three-cent tax stamps. She and her family sorted, counted, and redeemed them all. She was able to contribute \$2,143.40 to the building fund, one tenth of a penny at a time.¹⁸

Ms. Sarah "Auntie" Gruebler served 28 years as the superintendent of the Beginners Sunday School department¹⁹ from 1916 until 1944.²⁰

Eleanor Waterloo was a child of this church who served as a missionary in Thailand. Worldwide Communion day in October 1947 was designated "Eleanor Waterloo Day" here at Overbrook in her honor.²¹ Her father, Vic Waterloo was treasurer of the Sunday School and also the person who located the property on which the church sits today.²²

Gypsy Belle McIntosh,²³ Cecil Roy and Nellie Clouse,²⁴ Gordon Olson,²⁵ Jerry Riesen²⁶ all played important parts in teaching Sunday school and leading education programs during the church's early years.

If you polled the membership of this church asking for the names of people who have been important in the life of this congregation, I doubt many of the names I've mentioned here today would come up. But that's the point. Where we are today and who we are as a church is the result of the faithful, hard, and often anonymous work of the saints who have come before us. Through their dedication, they bequeathed us all the inheritance of a spiritual foundation on which we can grow and become what God intends for us to be.

Sir Isaac Newton once famously gave credit to those great minds who had come before him writing, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants." Author Linda Hogan puts that sentiment another way: "Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me," she writes. "Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands."²⁷

We are heirs to something grander than we can ever fully comprehend. Our traditions, our faith, our mission in the world, has all been passed to us by those faithful generations who came before us. If we have seen farther or accomplished more, it is because we stand on their shoulders. This congregation of which we are a part is not some structure of iron and stone, it is a mission built by love and when we receive God's Word and are sent forth into the world to live it, we are guided by the love of all those saints who have embarked on this same journey before us. The path is well-worn. Our direction is clear.

And as we love and serve God by loving and serving God's people, we grow that love and faithfulness and add to it, and we provide a foundation on which the next generation of the church will be built.

When we observe All Saints Day, we are recognizing the gifts to the church that God has given us in the form of *all* of those believers in every time and place who have shared their faith with us and who have handed down the knowledge and understanding of God through the generations. We thank God for those disciples who walk beside us and for those who have gone before us; for their contributions to our lives and faith and for God's work in and through them.

In just a moment we will read the names of those saints who have passed from this life into God's eternal presence over this year past. We will do so not as a sort of wistful tribute, but in honor of them and their contributions, and most importantly, in thanksgiving to God for blessing us with these men and women in our lives and in the life of the church. And as we remember them, we will be looking forward with anticipation to the future when we will be reunited with them and all of the saints in the Kingdom of God.

End Notes

¹ Bethea, April. "Nationals championship parade set for Saturday in Washington, D.C." Washington Post, 31 Oct. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/local/nationals-championship-parade-set-for-saturday-in-washington-dc/2019/10/31/476640d0-fba0-11e9-8190-6be4deb56e01_story.html.

² "Jackie Robinson Negro & Minor Leagues Statistics & History | Baseball-Reference.com." Baseball-Reference.com, 3 Nov. 2019, www.baseball-reference.com/register/player.fcgi?id=robins002jac.

³ "Montreal Royals - BR Bullpen." 2 Sept. 2019, www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Montreal_Royals.

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- ⁴ "Spider-Man (Peter Parker) | Characters | Marvel." Marvel Entertainment, 3 Nov. 2019, www.marvel.com/characters/spider-man-peter-parker.
- ⁵ "Hulk (Bruce Banner) | Characters | Marvel." Marvel Entertainment, 3 Nov. 2019, www.marvel.com/characters/hulk-bruce-banner.
- ⁶ Newman, Bruce. "Steve Jobs' old garage about to become a piece of history." Mercury News, 27 Sept. 2013, www.mercurynews.com/2013/09/27/steve-jobs-old-garage-about-to-become-a-piece-of-history.
- ⁷ "Charlie Hunnam Was Scouted at a Shoe Store and More of the Very Different Ways Your Favorite Celebs Were Discovered." PEOPLE.com, 31 Oct. 2019, people.com/celebrity/how-celebrities-were-discovered/?slide=5528527#5528527.
- ⁸ "Famous stars who were 'discovered' in the most unusual ways | KiwiReport." KiwiReport, 23 May. 2019, kiwireport.com/famous-stars-who-were-discovered-in-the-most-unusual-ways.
- ⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:2, NRSV
- ¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:11, NRSV
- ¹¹ Morrison, Francis G. "Bud". *A History of Overbrook Presbyterian Church*. Volume 1:1915-1953, Overbrook Presbyterian Church, 1990. p. 2
- ¹² Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 6.
- ¹³ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 13
- ¹⁴ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 11
- ¹⁵ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 14
- ¹⁶ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 28
- ¹⁷ "Ohio tax stamps · Local History Digital Collection." 1 Nov. 2019, www.yourppl.org/history/items/show/15784.
- ¹⁸ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 20
- ¹⁹ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 18
- ²⁰ Morrison, Francis G. "Bud". *A History of Overbrook Presbyterian Church*. Volume 2: 1953-1990, Overbrook Presbyterian Church, 1990. p. 13
- ²¹ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 19
- ²² Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 19
- ²³ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 7
- ²⁴ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 24
- ²⁵ Morrison, Vol. 2 p. 25
- ²⁶ Morrison, Vol. 1 p. 26
- ²⁷ Hogan, Linda. *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World*. Touchstone, 1995, page 159.