

“Trailblazers, Pathfinders, and Pioneers”

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All Saints Day

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Introduction to All Saints Day

Today we observe All Saints Day in the church. This observance originated in the church’s desire to honor martyrs of the faith with a special feast day dedicated to each one. At some point, however, perhaps due to the vigor and efficiency with which Roman Emperors persecuted Christians, there came to be more martyrs than there were days in the year on which to honor them. So, one day was set aside to honor all the martyrs of the church: All Saints Day. Some parts of the greater church began to venerate many of those saints and make miraculous claims about them. Many of these saints were raised to a level where it was believed they could serve as intermediaries between humans and God.

The reformers, however, began to think differently about such things. And today when we talk about the Saints in our modern Presbyterian tradition, 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.

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* by God, which is a fancy word that means to make something holy. When he addresses his first letter to the church in Corinth “to the saints” he is writing to the whole congregation which is made up of regular people, sinners one and all, but people who have been made holy, through Christ Jesus.¹ Through our baptisms we are marked as God’s own and we are sanctified; we are made acceptable and holy unto God, washed and made new for service to God.² For Paul, members of the church are called “saints,” not because of what they had accomplished, but because of who they are in Christ.

And so, in our reformed Presbyterian tradition, we do not set individuals apart as being more worthy of praise for things they have done. We do not venerate individuals, nor do we seek intercession from those we may consider heroes of the faith. 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.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:1-3

¹Therefore, 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: *Trailblazers, Pathfinders, and Pioneers*

By now most of you realize I cut my hair. Will Grey had brain surgery last week and he had his head shaved in preparation for surgery, so I joined him in solidarity. It’s hard looking radically different from your peers, especially at 15. I hoped if he weren’t the only one, he might feel a little better about it. But I also need to emphasize that *I* cut my hair. I did it myself. And believe it or not, shaving my own head was not something I had ever done before. So, I did what so many people do today when they need technical guidance, I turned to the internet. No matter what you are trying to do, there is probably a video on YouTube of a person who has done it before, showing you how. So, I sat down and watched as a professional barber showed proper technique and gave advice as he shaved his own head. And then, armed with this new knowledge, and a Remington Beard trimmer, I went to work. And because I had someone else do it first, it was easier for me.

I guess my point is that it’s nice to have someone else go first because going first is scary. Think about the first person in human history to eat an oyster, or the first person to pet a dog. Those were some brave people. Having someone else go first and show you the way, makes everything a little bit easier. We call those people who boldly go where no one has gone before trailblazers, pathfinders, and pioneers. They lead the way, break down barriers, and clear a path for those who are to follow. Sometimes that’s in a literal sense.

Before the allied landings on Normandy during World War II, small groups of just 18 paratroopers called “Pathfinders” were dropped in behind enemy lines to mark landing zones for the thousands of paratroopers that were to follow.³ In 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out on a two year journey to explore the Louisiana Purchase and made maps of the American West for future travelers and settlers to follow.⁴ Long before the Interstate highway system, there was the Lewis and Clark trail. But we also benefit from those who blaze a trail in a metaphorical sense, endeavoring to do what has never been done before. People like Janet Guthrie who was the first woman to compete in the Daytona 500 and the Indianapolis 500,⁵ and Rubie Bridges, who in 1960, at just 6 years old, became the first African American to attend previously segregated William Franz elementary school in New Orleans, and faced down all the hatred and racist vitriol that came with it.

There is so much that we take for granted these days, that we are only able to enjoy because of those courageous, intrepid trailblazers, pathfinders, pioneers who came this way first. And that is true in the church, as well.

Much has already been said about 2020, and how hard a year it has been: Between the protests, and the COVID pandemic and the so-ugly-it’s-hard-to-believe-sometimes campaign season, it has been a challenging year, to say the least. For some it may even have been a year of testing faith. But it is not the first such period in our history. Over the last hundred years or so we’ve endured the Spanish Flu, Polio, AIDS, SARS, and Ebola. We’ve seen a Great Depression and several great recessions. We’ve weathered two world wars, and wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East. And we’ve grown through social upheaval from the women’s rights movement to the civil rights movement and the struggle for LGBTQ rights all the way up to today’s ongoing protests for social justice.

And through all of that, the church has been a beacon, showing us the way, and calling those who suffer, those who struggle, those who are afraid, to come and find strength and comfort in Christ Jesus.

As we face our own difficulties and uncertainties, and what can at times seem like a very unstable world, it can be easy to feel lost; it can be easy to feel as though we are in an impenetrable wilderness, with no clear way forward. But when we look, we can see that others have come this way before.

I think of the Christians who remained faithful through the Battle of Britain in World War II when German planes bombed the cities of Great Britain almost nightly. I think of the members of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama who continued to worship and serve God when their sanctuary was destroyed by a Klansman’s bomb, taking the lives of four young girls in 1963.⁶ I think of the members of Sutherland Springs Baptist Church and Mother Emmanuel AME church who leaned on God and one another through the tragedy of mass shootings. We are not the first to endure difficult times. But we have been given the gift of all those saints who have come this way before us, the trailblazers, the pathfinders, the pioneers who have shown us the way.

Their legacy reminds us that God is in control, no matter what. And that all the things we fear most in the world, even death, wither against the power of God’s grace, mercy and steadfast love. Their legacy remind us that when it seems as though self-preservation is the only way, that the greatest law is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. And that we do not hate our enemies, we love them and pray for them. Their legacy reminds us that no matter what the world tells us is necessary or acceptable, the way of Christ is still the best way for us to live. Their legacy reminds us that in Christ, in the coming Kingdom of God, we have hope.

This is the legacy of those trailblazers, pathfinders, and pioneers who, for generations, have told and retold the old, old story; who have lived that faith and trusted in God to lead them through to the other side. It is the legacy of those who have gone before us; those who invited us into this church, who raised their hands at our baptisms and swore to help guide us in the way that we should go; who taught our Sunday School classes and led our Bible studies; who nurtured us through difficult times and who celebrated with us in our seasons of joy. These are the ones who taught us by their words and by their deeds and by their faithful presence in worship, through good times and bad; who didn’t just talk about their faith, but who lived it. These are the people who, empowered by God’s Holy Spirit, built a community of believers in which we have found a home today.

These are the ones who went first, endured the hardships, and cleared the path. And we are charged to follow them. We may feel lost at times, and hemmed in by the threats around us, but because such a great cloud of witnesses has come this way before, we know the way.

So, 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.

So, as we read the names of those who have passed away this year, we will do so not as a sort of wistful tribute. But in honor of them and their contributions, and 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 1 Corinthians 1:2, NRSV

² 1 Corinthians 6:11, NRSV

³ "The First Into France – Meet the Elite "Pathfinders" of the Normandy Invasion." MilitaryHistoryNow, 12 June 2018, militaryhistorynow.com/2015/08/21/first-in-the-fight-11-fascinating-facts-about-d-days-airborne-pathfinders.

⁴ National Geographic Society. "Lewis and Clark Trail." National Geographic Society, 19 Feb. 2020, www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/lewis-and-clark-trail.

⁵ Contributors to Wikimedia projects. "Janet Guthrie - Wikipedia." 26 Oct. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Janet_Guthrie&oldid=985574659.

⁶ "16th Street Baptist Church bombing | History & Four Girls." Encyclopedia Britannica, 8 Sept. 2020, www.britannica.com/event/16th-Street-Baptist-Church-bombing.